

# Feature



## Working with a Professional Wig Maker *Heather K. Fleming*

*A high-quality wig or facial hair can add authenticity to a costume. This article describes commissioning a handmade wig and working with a professional wig maker.*

I started my career in wig design and construction working in theatre. For a decade, I made my living working at theatres around the country, including the Barter Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Indiana Repertory Theatre, and many others. During that time, I maintained a portfolio website for freelance wig work and through that website, was often contracted to build wigs or facial hair for Santas, historical reenactors and others.

As time went on, I was taking more and more of these freelance commissions, and also finding myself ready for a change in my day-to-day existence. I decided to formally create a business entity for these commission projects, and in 2010, [Custom Wig Company](#) was officially born, with a workspace in a spare half-bathroom of my home. After a couple of years (and well ahead of my wildest dreams!), the company was doing a brisk enough business that it

was time to leave my full time position in theatre and focus on the company.

Since that time, the company has grown rapidly. From a half-bathroom, we now occupy an entire story of an old Victorian house, and instead of just me, there's now a team of four skilled wig artisans creating pieces. My day to day life now centers more around the running of the business than building wigs, and we've established ourselves within the Santa, cosplay and reenactment communities as the go-to source for high quality, handmade custom wigs and facial hair.

During the course of a typical year, we'll create 30-50 Santa wigs and/or beards, 40-50 projects for cosplayers, and a substantial number of projects for tribute

artists and impersonators, historical reenactors, and smaller scale wigs for dolls and puppets. We don't typically do "day wear" wigs or toupees (wigs or pieces intended to be worn by folks in their everyday life owing to hair loss) or wigs made from non-traditional materials (like foam, yarn etc).

Santa is the persona we create pieces for most often, but you might be surprised that the next most frequently commissioned pieces are Tom Jones wigs, "Grey Wizard" wig and beard sets, and "Charlie McCarthy" wigs for ventriloquist puppets.

As part of our work life, we attend a wide range of conventions and conferences, as both vendors and simply interested persons. In 2016, we'll be at the Kalamazoo



A quality handmade custom wig and facial hair add authenticity to Santa or a Grey Wizard.

Living History Expo, Lexington Comic Con, Costume Con 34, Discover Santa, Dragon\*Con, and several other smaller regional events, as well as the largest Jane Austen Festival in North America. At many of these events, we dress up and wear our wigs and facial hair, both because it's a lot of fun and because it's the best way to show people our work!

If you're curious about why someone would invest US\$ 700-1000 in having a wig created, I invite you to read my article, "[Why Invest In a Custom Wig](#)." It gives a good rundown of the major reasons our clients decide to have a wig created, rather than opting for a commercially available, mass-produced wig.

So how do you order a custom wig? And why would you need one? What happens if you have a wig built and you don't like it? And how do we build custom



Comparison showing interior of mass produced wig and hand-knotted custom wig.

wigs for people all over the world, without seeing them in person?

Our clients typically have a wig created from scratch because they can't find the right piece commercially produced, or because they want their wig to be very natural and realistic, or because they've repeatedly had issues with the fit of mass produced wigs.

Let's start by quickly talking about the terms "custom wig" and "lace front." For us, a custom wig means that we are creating a wig from scratch, just for you. The wig did not exist before we began our process – we build it from the foundation up. It's made to fit you, and created to your specifications such as color, length, texture, style, etc. Our custom wigs are made on sturdy, tailored foundations, and are a solid base. They're very different than typical machine made wigs. Most notably, they are lighter in weight, the hair is dispersed through the wig evenly (rather than rows of hair on elastic strips) and the density is far more realistic.



Detail of handmade custom wig, showing fine lace front and knotted hairline.

A term that gets thrown around a lot when discussing wigs is "lace front," and I want to take a moment to discuss that, too. On a basic level, a lace front wig can be any wig that has a piece of mesh along the front hairline, with hairs inserted through it. There are many commercial machine made wigs with lace fronts. Those are definitely "lace front" wigs, but they're not nearly as discreet and seamless as the lace fronts on our wigs.

Most wig makers use a very fine nylon or silk mesh for their lace fronts - 20/30 or 40 deniers. This material is quite light, transparent, and drapes very softly and discreetly across the skin. The mesh can also be dyed to match a skin tone. Commercial lace fronts are most commonly made from a heavier plastic or nylon mesh that is intended to be cut back closer to the hairline. It is usually quite visible if it left untrimmed.



Three clients' tracings on wig block, padded to fit size and shape of tracing.

The foundation of any quality item of apparel, whether wig or garment, is the fit. Without a good fit, good styling or great fabric means little. This is especially important for the sorts of projects we excel at – realistic, natural pieces that look like you grew them yourself, even if they're a little (or a lot!) larger than life.

To build a wig or facial hair, we need a tracing of the person's head or face. This involves wrapping plastic wrap around the head, covering with tape, and drawing on the hairline, ears, nape, etc. It's a terribly unsophisticated process but it's effective, and can be done easily by our clients and then mailed to us. We have a [video](#) that shows how. Wig making as a craft hasn't evolved a lot in the past few centuries, though the way we get our hair and materials, and some of the tools have been modernized a bit. We tell people that this plastic wrap tracing is actually the biggest leap in wig making technology in centuries!

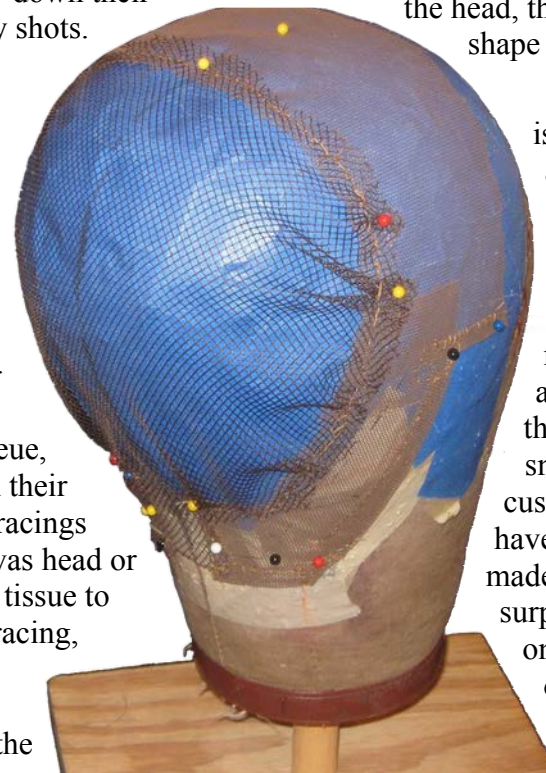
From a nuts-and-bolts business standpoint, we ask clients for these tracings, we take a down payment (typically 50%, though we offer other installment plans), and we require a signed project agreement. We also ask for photos of the client, and for them to identify or supply a few key images as a guide for their wig. If we are creating a project that is inspired by a

character from film, TV or other media, we'll ask them to narrow down their images to one or two key shots. That cuts down on discrepancies caused by lighting, filming, makeup, episodic changes, etc.

When it's time to actually build their wig or facial hair (the time between taking the order and starting the build depends on our work queue, and to a lesser extent, on their deadlines), we take the tracings and put them onto a canvas head or chin block. Then we use tissue to pad the head under the tracing, leaving us with a head block that is carefully shaped to be as close to the client's head as possible,

with their hairline and other landmarks drawn on. It's as close as we can get to having their actual head in our hands!

We are often asked why we need a tracing when it would be easier for our clients to just send in measurements. If you've ever tried to purchase jeans based solely on the measurements without trying them on, you probably already have some idea of the answer. In short, a roomful of men could all have a 22 inch (56 cm) head circumference, but the same wig would not work well on all of them, even if it was built on a head block that size. The measurements simply don't take into account the shape of the head, the curve of the cranium, or the shape and style of the hairline.



A pieced wig foundation, ready to be sewn

The foundation for the wig is pieced right onto the block, and hand-sewn. It is typically a sturdy nylon or silk based mesh, with a much finer mesh for the front area. This part of the process resembles tailoring more than anything else. Our goal is for the wig's foundation to fit snugly but not bindingly. A custom wig doesn't typically have a stretch base like a machine made wig, so many clients are surprised when they put their wig on, as it doesn't cinch down onto their head. We tell people that a custom wig fits like a well made fedora

whereas a machine made wig fits more like a knit toboggan.

Once we've made that foundation, we put the hair in. The hair is either put into the wig in sewn strips (called "wefts") or else knotted in singly with a hook (like latch hooking a rug on a microscopic scale) - the front and top is always knotted, and sometimes the entire back is, too. For wigs that need to be very long or very full, we'll use strips of weft for the back portion, and then tie everything else - for wigs that need to be very natural, or shorter, or very multidirectional, we'll knot the entire wig.



Partially knotted wig on lace cap.

We build facial hair in the same way we build a wig. The client sends us a tracing of their lower face, jawline and neck so that we can shape their facial hair to fit them. A foundation is pieced using primarily the same fine lace mesh we use for wig fronts, because the density and execution of a mustache or beard is similar to the front hairline of a wig.



With large beards like Santa or the Grey Wizard, we sometimes use sturdier net for the lower portion, as it will need to be able to bear the weight of more hair, and is hidden entirely from view. Mustaches are built separately from beards or goatees, in order to give the client as much facial mobility and realism as possible.

What kind of hair do we use? Well, it depends on the project. Both human hair and synthetic fibers have their strengths and weaknesses. We discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the two fibers and their uses in a recent [article](#). For most projects, we use human hair because it's more lifelike, a lot more resilient, and more versatile. (Don't believe me? The custom wig I made for myself is human hair, and it's so flexible that I use it for my Ned Stark cosplay as well as my 1790's hedgehog). It's

---

**Left:** Foundation of Santa beard on chin block, stitched and ready to have hair put in it.

---

also usually a lot cooler to wear, and much more obliging for styles that need to be roller set.

We do use synthetic hair, though, and it's great, too. We use it for projects where the aesthetic should be a bit more artificial (think, anime wigs) or for projects that require insane length, or sometimes for projects where we need a really bold or saturated color. There's a lot of really good quality synthetic hair on the market these days, so it's a viable option for a lot of projects. It's also usually cheaper than human hair, so we offer it as an option for our clients if we think it would make a really excellent wig.



Interior (above) and exterior (below) of a Santa beard.

We don't typically use synthetic hair for facial hair pieces. The process of gluing and removing facial hair can really wear out those tiny knots, as they are often require more liquid adhesives be applied, and the cleaning process can be very hard on synthetic fibers, sometimes even dissolving the hairs.

We purchase our hair from a variety of suppliers. The hair is sold by weight, in ¼ pound bundles most of the time. We order based on the color, texture, length and quality of the hair, as determined by the project in question.

After we get all of the hair put into a wig, we cut the hair into the right shape (in most cases, we build wigs with longer hair than the finished piece will be), and then we style it.

Sometimes, that's as simple as giving it a quick spritz with water, and a combing, other times it involves a complex set with rollers and an hour in the wig dryer. After the style is completed, we send the client photos of the wig on a mannequin head, and they can request any changes or adjustments they want.



---

**Left:** Hair purchased from suppliers comes in ¼ pound bundles, and is ordered based on color, length, texture and grade.

---

Sometimes, they'll ask us to adjust the color, or tweak the style. Once that's done, we send them the wig.

The fun part comes when they receive their wig and try it on! At that point, there might be some small issues with the style (I always tell my students that the real work comes in the first fitting of a wig, not styling it on the head. Putting a head and face into a wig can sometimes dramatically change how the style looks!).

Most of the time, we can troubleshoot that sort of thing long distance, if the client sends us a photo of themselves in the wig. Once in awhile, there will be some changes that need to be made, and they'll send it back to us for some adjustments. Our goal is for our clients to be completely satisfied with their wig, so that means we have to be very available for helping them do the fittings and application long distance. I've mentioned that we use photos for much of that, but we do also use videos and Skype

---

**Left:** Finished Santa beard on a chin block, with rollers, ready to be styled in wig dryer.

---



sessions. We have also created a library of videos and posts to help our clients use and care for our pieces.

In order to wear a wig, the client must ensure their own hair (if they have any) is secured and contained. For longer hair, two braids are effective, shorter haired people can likely make use of a few large, flat pin curls. A mesh wig cap is pinned over the wearer's own hair, and pinned securely to their hair. This provides a sturdy and stable foundation for the wig, in addition to keeping their hair from slipping around under the wig.

For those who have very short or no hair, very little preparation is needed to wear a custom wig. The head and skin should be free of oil and make up, and any stray hairs should be pinned back from the hairline when possible.



Placement and anchoring mesh wig cap.

The wig is placed on the head, placement is checked in a mirror to ensure it is on the head squarely and placed in the correct position, with the wig's hairline just in front of the wearer's hairline. Once placement is correct, it's up to the wearer how they want to secure the wig to their head. Some wigs are very light in weight and their custom fit means little is required to keep them on - often just a bit of toupee tape or liquid adhesive is used to hold the margins of wig lace in place at the temples.

For a long wig, or a wig with a larger or heavier style (think period hairstyles with the bulk of the wig's hair on the back of the head, or a wig with a very long braid, it will be necessary to pin the wig to the head to keep it in place. The best way to do this is to secure own's hair as mentioned earlier, put the wig on and ensure correct placement, then insert two large hairpins. These pins should go on the top of the head, through both the wig and the wig cap, and into the hair. That ensures the wig will stay put, even with gravity at work. once those pins are in place, the wearer may then secure down the lace edges at the temples, and may also wish to use two more hairpins to secure the wig to their nape, if the wig is styled in an updo.

Facial hair is applied using toupee tape or glue, as it needs to be stuck to the vertical surface of the face. A beard may be able to have an elastic strap in place, that is covered by either a wig or the wearer's own hair. In that case, the wearer will just need to use adhesive or tape to ensure the beard is attached to the chin and around the mouth. Skin should be free from moisture, oil and makeup at the spots where glue or tape will be used.

Anchoring wigs or facial hair is not an exact science. Every person has different skin and different needs, and a product or method that works well for one person or one situation, may not work at all in another. For this reason, we encourage our clients to leave time to try on their pieces and test out various options, to see what will work best



Custom hairpieces for a cosplay client.

for them. Additionally, if a client is going to use the pieces in a wide range of environments (for example, both outdoor parades and also long stints indoors), we suggest they do a trial run of their usual method of attachment, to ensure it will work in both conditions.

We have several [videos](#) demonstrating how to put on and take off a Santa wig and facial hair that will give you a better idea of the process.

With proper care and upkeep, our wigs and beards can last for many years, even with heavy use. It's important to keep the lace free from adhesive and makeup residue, and to prevent tangles from forming larger knots or "rats" in the hair. Small pieces like mustaches or eyebrows will need to be

replaced more often, as their small surface area means they take more of a beating from repeated applications. A wig or beard can generally have a new lace front put on it, to refresh and restore the piece and allow for even more years of use. Even if a wig or facial hair suffers a catastrophe or isn't maintained as carefully as might be hoped for, we can often repair or restore the piece, particularly if it is made of human hair.

So that's the process by which we create a wig facial hair for someone. We are sometimes fortunate enough to be able to meet with our clients in person, either at an event or in our studio, and take the tracings ourselves - sometimes we even get to fit the finished pieces on them in person, which is always really special. We have clients as far away as Japan and Australia, and we have had clients visit us all the way from Norway and the UK!

*Heather K. Fleming has designed the hair,wigs and makeup for theatre and opera, at venues throughout the country. In 2010, she founded the [Custom Wig Company](#), based in Louisville, KY, focusing on creating high quality wigs, facial hair and hairpieces for historians, re-enactors, interpreters, museums, theatres, actors, Santas and anyone else who needs their help telling a story. Heather holds a MFA in Costume Technology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a BS in theater from Illinois State University.*