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TOWN & COUNTRY

MAY 2018

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By Sarah Maslin Nir
Photographs by Victor Demarchelier
Styled by Nicoletta Santoro

STRAND of TRUTH

HAIR, JEWELS,
AND THE
ROOT OF
MULTIPLE
IDENTITIES.

BROOCHES, CLOCKWISE
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Lipstick means little. A slash of red or a brush of beige suggests only that the wearer is feeling frisky or pouty, daring or demure. Slap on all the concealer you want, brush on every iota of blush available, and all you'll do is cover a flaw or highlight a cheek, hiding, perhaps without meaning to, the woman beneath the war paint.

Now try dyeing your hair. Lighten it with peroxide or deepen the hue from summer to sunset. Chop it off. Go from glamorous tresses to gamine crop. Buzz it, pick it out, and 'fro it. Willfully forget to brush it until the split ends make those around you titter about what you got up to last night. Cornrow it.

Each strand and style is a talisman; hair is the great cultural Rorschach test that telegraphs how we want to be seen and determines how we *are* seen. It is a powerful weapon wherein lie history and herstory and the truth of who we are. In the tony reaches of Manhattan there is a storied penthouse salon overlooking the Plaza Hotel and the esplanade of Fifth Avenue. There, up so high that the tourists and Upper East Siders become one, John Barrett, the eponymous owner, created a woman out of hair inside a posh department store.

She was the Bergdorf Blonde, a lemony concoction lionized in the late '90s for her perfect plumage and roots that never showed. She was wealth and whiteness, prestige and peroxide—and, even as he sculpted the look into an icon, Barrett showed that she wasn't inaccessible, or even real: She could be created. He democratized a bombshell identity with a bottle of bleach.

In the '80s, hair was “a total escape. Nature didn't come into it. It was a statement,” Barrett tells me. That artifice eventually gave way to a new transparency, even if that became its own sort of performance. “The statement at the moment is soft waves, as hair's own no-makeup look,” he continues. “It's saying, ‘Look, I'm so perfect I don't even have to try.’ There is a uniformity to it, and the goal is somewhat perfection. Not eclecticism, not individuality.”

How did we get there? How did we reach peak coif semiotics? How can a good hair day make (or a bad one break) us? How can a sleek pony, a tight Bantu knot, or a platinum hue define us? Hair is swept up in the continuum of history; we wear it, and its legacy, over our shoulders. Take, for example, the concept of blondes having more fun. “It began as early as ancient Rome, when prostitutes were required by law to dye their hair blond,” says Jennifer Wright, the author of the recent style history *Killer Fashion*. “That kicked off the idea that sexy, fun women had blond hair, and it conversely implied that women with dark hair were reputable and ‘serious.’”

A Roman edict induced me to buy a bottle of Clairol? What else hides in the twists and turns of a curl? Michaela Angela Davis explores the tensions and politics of hair in her *Vagina Monologues*-esque video series *The Hair Tales*, in which black women, including celebrities and activists, rhapsodize about their tresses. “It holds our history, our stories, our ancestors,” Davis says. “It trips people out; it holds their hysteria, their pathologies, and their fantasies about us.”

Davis, a former editor at *Essence* and *Vibe*, first became aware of the limited conception of black beauty in mainstream culture as a young woman whose hair was naturally nappy *and* blond. “I have a color that is associated with whiteness but a texture associated with blackness, and there was something about being black and blond that was difficult for others,” she says. But slowly she and others are moving to reclaim black hair in all its kinky, versatile glory.

“Black hair is art, and we make it artful,” she says. “It is a way in which we praise and express our creativity. Our hair and our style are places of freedom and sites of expression [CONTINUED ON PAGE 145]



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