Member Lecture – 18 January 2024

Bigwigs and nitpickers: the rise and fall of the wig – 1650-1800
Jo Bath, WEA tutor

Questions answered post-lecture

Q1 The ornaments placed into women's wigs, were they brooches?

Usually, they seem to be done using pins (then called hair needles). Some things would be on ribbons woven into the hair.

Q2 Who can wear a wig in court and is there a hierarchy of stiles to denote seniority?

Everyone would be wearing one in court - there's no place for lowlife! Even some of the accused had a Tyburn Top, which is a sort of hair piece at the forehead (hence the name, from the gallows of Tyburn). There were no rules about who wore what type, though judges might look askance at a barrister getting above himself. There's a 1790 reference (by which point they are getting rare anyway) to a Mr Erskine QC, wearing a 'new invented wig' of 'extraordinary size' which 'put the judges perfectly out of countenance'.

Q3 Would long curly hair command more money for wig making?

Definitely. The qualities they would look for would be length, strength, natural curl and ideally natural blonde.

Q4 Could you remind us how it started was it fashion only?

It starts with seventeenth-century French kings with hair problems, moves to English kings, and from then to everyone with elite (i.e. French) tastes, and then to everyone else.

Q5 What happened to all the unemployed wig makers? And what about the young women who could no longer earn money selling their hair?

Some went into ribbon weaving. Some helped kickstart a whole new art of the nineteenth century - using hair to make jewellery and ornaments, especially jewellery commemorating the dead!

I think the young women just had to cope…

Useful links and resources for further reading

Kendra Van Cleave does some fascinating work on the practical side of making and styling your own hair / wig, but I think the book may only be available in America. From her additional resources at **http://18thcenturyhair.com/** you can get to a pdf of styles and accessories.