

Wig Maker

BY PAUL MARGOLIS

Wigs have been used for fashion, ritual, and religious purposes—as well as vanity—through the millennia. In ancient Egypt, wigs served to protect shaved heads from the sun. Other ancient peoples, including the Assyrians, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans, also made use of wigs.

Karen Sell is a modern practitioner of the age-old craft of wig making. A native of Singapore, Karen studied hairstyling in England, where she also took a course in wig making. She worked as a stylist for the Vidal Sassoon salons in London, then later in New York when she immigrated to this country in the late 1980s. In New York, she also worked as a stylist at a salon that made wigs. There, she styled and maintained wigs for clients, then established her own wig-making business about fifteen years ago. Karen and her husband Peter, who handles the financial end of the business, are the principals of Karen's Wigs in midtown Manhattan.

When Karen first started her business in the early 1990s, wigs were worn primarily as fashion statements, but that began to change by about 1995. These days, Karen estimates that 85 percent of her clients buy wigs for medical reasons. Chemotherapy treatments, alopecia and other diseases of the hair and scalp, and even extreme stress can cause hair loss in women.

Karen works with both human hair and synthetic materials. Originally, most of the human hair that she used came from Italy, but because of rising costs and the trend for shorter hair among Italian women, she now uses hair imported from China and India. Her wigs are blends of hair from those two countries: Chinese hair is coarser, so the ratio is 20 percent Chinese hair to 80 percent Indian.

Custom wig making is an elaborate and time-consuming process. Using wood-handled implements that look like a cross between crochet needles and dental probes, individual strands of hair are pulled through the mesh of the “cornet,” the bonnet-like matrix that forms the foundation of the

wig. The process of attaching hair to the mesh is called “ventilating,” and a skilled ventilator can command sixty dollars or more an hour.

Karen employs two part-time ventilators. It takes five to seven days of steady work to craft a wig. The finished wigs sell for upwards of two thousand dollars.

Wigs also need to be styled. “It’s very hard to find a good hair stylist for wigs,” explains Karen. “They are very different from regular

hair. Wigs have to

be styled and fitted to the person,” she says. “You can’t just go to a store and buy one off the rack, like a blouse or skirt.” Because they need to be styled and adjusted periodically, wigs are made with extra hair because “wigs never grow back.”

Karen has plenty of horror stories about how hairstylists lacking the necessary skills ruined clients’ wigs costing thousands of dollars. One client, a concert violinist, had her wig destroyed just before a performance and had to go on stage with a synthetic hairpiece that Karen made at the last minute.

Wigs require a great deal of care, which is one of the reasons why Karen caters only to women. “Men shouldn’t wear a hairpiece,” she says, in part because men aren’t scrupulous enough about keeping them in good order. “They need to learn how to take care of a hairpiece, how to wash it.”

“You need to make sure that a wig is cleaned every two weeks,” Karen says. The cleaning process involves soaking in wig cleaner, rinsing and conditioning, and then “baking” in an oven-like wig dryer. In her



workroom, Karen had wigs in various stages of completion, as well as those that were in the shop for cleaning and maintenance. Wigs on styrofoam heads were in curlers and in the process of being colored, cut, and styled.

In the fifteen years she’s been in business for herself, Karen has had a series of shops, all around West 57th Street. Most of her clients are in the area; they include celebrities and Broadway performers, as well as women who need her custom designs because of conditions that have led to hair loss.

Karen finds her work extremely gratifying. “I like that I’m helping people—especially women going through chemo—to feel good about themselves.” She uses her skills in a profession that goes back thousands of years to help women in the modern world. ▼

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