PANORAMA
Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art
ISSN: 2471-6839

Cite this article: Sarah Gold McBride, review of *Beyond Vanity: The History and Power of Hairdressing*, by Elizabeth L. Block, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2025), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.19977.

Beyond Vanity: The History and Power of Hairdressing

By Elizabeth L. Block

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024. 248 pp.; 70 color illus.; 19 b/w illus. Hardcover: $39.95 (ISBN: 9780262049054)

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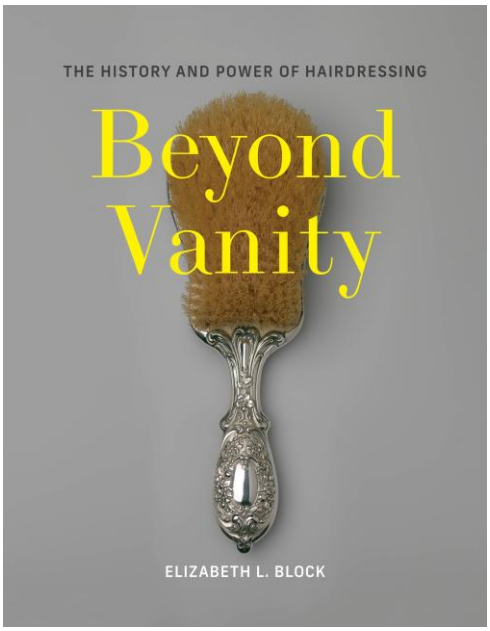

Beyond Vanity begins as a play on words. In the skillful hands of art historian Elizabeth L. Block, hairstyles are not trivial or worthless—the domain of the vain—nor does their fundamental ephemerality render them unworthy of scholarly consideration. Yet the title also suggests the book's core organizing principle: rooting hairdressing in place. The text begins with the domestic bedroom spaces where a vanity table is often found but then moves swiftly to places and spaces as varied as the theatrical stage, the agricultural field, the beach, and the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893—places of significance for the white and Black American women who form the primary subjects of this book. By moving beyond both the vanity mirror and the triviality of vanity, Block shows how, in the United States between 1865 and 1900, the work, the play, and the art of hairstyling shaped interior spaces, architecture, social gatherings, workplaces, sites of outdoor leisure, and even international capitalist markets.

In five thematic chapters centered on different types of "hair places" (7) that were important to Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century, Block draws on a rich array of visual, material, and textual sources to demonstrate "how quotidian practices hold deep meaning" (143). Indeed, the most immediately arresting feature of *Beyond Vanity* is its collection of images: nearly one hundred gorgeous, vivid, and frequently full-color figures include oil paintings, photographic portraits, candid snapshots, cartoons, trade cards, and advertisements of all kinds. Complementing this visual evidence is reference to the kinds of sources often found in works of social and cultural history: women's journals and letters as well as the texts that composed the burgeoning mass media of the nineteenth century, such as magazine and newspaper articles, pamphlets, and popular fiction. Writing about hair historically is challenging from the outset thanks to the lack of any centralized or cohesive hair archive in the United States, yet Block successfully manages to build a hairdressing archive of her own from these varied sources.

Following an introductory first chapter, the book's second chapter examines the places where Black and white American women created hair meaning by "repeat[ing] daily practices within a space over time" (15), inside bedrooms, barbershops, and parlors. We learn of the men and women who cared for women's hair, including rare interior photographs of hairdressing parlors, where solid, heavy furniture designed especially for hairdressing signaled, Block argues, the "cultural weight" of the artful labor (56). In Chapter 3, we move from hair's preparation to its moment in the spotlight—at parties, on theatrical stages, and in poses for the photographer's camera. Hairstyles were performative, whether they were on a stage or off, because they communicated a woman's identity in social contexts. Block writes, "There was a degree of self-determination in how women presented themselves that may be discerned by paying attention to their choices of hairstyle and hair color" (82). The fourth chapter moves even more emphatically to sites of labor, centering on Black and white women in workplaces and marketplaces. This chapter contains lovely, detailed descriptions of "the lived experiences of women in the workplace" and how those experiences "affected their hairdressing practices," particularly because so many workplaces were "mixed-race settings" that "fostered different meanings of hair" and even different vocabulary to talk about the hair that grew from Black and white women's heads (83–84).

I particularly enjoyed Chapter 5, in which hair rides on bicycles, travels on trains, and goes to the beach. The analysis of the New Woman's iconic hairstyle, most associated with the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson, was especially well crafted. Block does not merely document the style's rounded shape and voluminous size, nor does she limit her analysis to pointing out that the style allowed women to "take up space," both literally and symbolically (134), pushing back on "patriarchal allocation and control of space" (140). Block's crucial insight is that this style was quick and easy to arrange, thus making it well suited to being "in transit, exercising, and bathing in the sea"—the expanded domains of the turn-of-the-century New Woman (140). Here we see an example of the fruits of Block's labors most vividly on display. She demonstrates how caring about hair care provides us with new insights, even when exploring well-trodden territory.

Finally, the sixth chapter turns its gaze internationally as it considers how hair communicated national identity—even empire—at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and in the international market for human hair. As Block points out, the international hair market simply could not exist without the women who grew their hair and allowed it to be shorn for sale. Centering the women who produced the hair thus restores poor and laboring women's agency to the capitalistic marketplace and takes seriously even the most embodied and quotidian kind of labor of growing one's hair. This conclusion is thus a vivid demonstration of Block's commitment to the "corporeality and materiality" of hair (164).

Although its five chapters are organized around place, locating hair in time is equally crucial to Block's approach in *Beyond Vanity*. As the introduction explains, "By foregrounding time and place, we can restore the cultural significance of daily hair practices" (17). Historical context, in other words, matters. At the same time, the one element of this book that would have benefited from further elaboration was its historical context. To be sure, as an art-historical text written largely for audiences in art history, hair studies, or fashion studies, *Beyond Vanity* is a triumph. And yet, each time an opening for deeper historical contextualization presented itself in the text, I found myself yearning for more.

For example, Chapter 3 refers three times to the story of Sissieretta Jones, a Black actress who did not wear a wig on stage because she "would not hide what I am even for an evening" (67). Block explains that "Jones's choice to wear her natural hair in a pompadour instead of under a wig meant that she brought more of her whole self to the stage in front of what was likely a mostly white audience. The viewers watched, while her natural voice and hair communicated back" (82). This insight would have been even sharper had it incorporated the broader context of Afro-textured hair—why it would matter, in other words, for a Black woman in the 1890s to reveal or obscure her natural hair texture. Similarly, in Chapter 5, Block characterizes a satirical cartoon, published in an August 1895 issue of *Life* magazine, as "captur[ing] the anxiety of the moment" (128–29). Yet despite a detailed description of the key visual elements found in this cartoon—a wet bathing suit, a loose chignon, a bicycling woman wearing a fedora, and curious onlookers—Block never tells the reader about what, exactly, made Americans in that moment so anxious. The reader is left to fill in the blanks. (I wondered, too, about the book's emphatic treatment of race as largely binary; apart from some discussion of hair imported from China and other Asian countries in Chapter 6, this is a book about Black women and white women alone.)

Beyond Vanity begins by claiming its place within the emergent field of hair studies—a field that, as Block puts it, "celebrates and interrogates women's hair" (1). But what Block does in this book is far more than just a simplistic celebration. To be sure, the act of historical recovery that *Beyond Vanity* represents is one from which art historians, historians, media-studies scholars, scholars of gender and race, and cultural geographers will benefit. (I am already dreaming of ways to incorporate Block's research on hairstyles worn for swimming and boardwalk strolls into an undergraduate course I teach on the American beach.) Hair and hairdressing, Block reminds us at the start and end of each chapter, has meaning, significance, and power. Such repeated reminders feel almost like an incantation to ward off the dreaded assertion that hair is trivial and thus does not matter. Similar disparagement once plagued fashion, too, one of many ways that Block's background in fashion studies shapes the present study; comparisons between the cultural functions of hair and clothing, for example, are found throughout the book.[1] Hairdressing has indeed been dogged by accusations of triviality since the 1770s, when, Block argues, English artists like Matthias Darly and Mary Darly crafted satirical prints that depicted hairstyles with impossible volume and absurd decorations, such as creeping vines, a basket of peaches, a full head of lettuce. These prints suggested that elaborate hairdressing—even that which paled in comparison to the Darlys' hyperbolized hallucinations—was evidence of the kind of excessive and frivolous luxury achievable only by aristocrats. The declining popularity of wigs in England and its North American colonies—first by men and then, by the end of the eighteenth century, by women—cemented such associations.

Despite the growing popularity in the nineteenth century of "more natural, restrained styles . . . [that were] significantly more contained than those of the last decades of the previous century," hair appears to have struggled to shake its association with frivolity, at least in the eyes of scholars (12). And yet, what is eminently clear in *Beyond Vanity* is that people in the past took their hair seriously—just as Block implores us to do. That seriousness is communicated through the expenditure of money, time, and labor by the hairdressers, barbers, and other hair-care workers who styled Black and white women's hair, as well as by the women themselves.

Embedded within this claim, moreover, is something perhaps even more radical: that joy does not make something unserious. "Women's letters and diaries express joy in trying out a new style," Block writes in the book's conclusion; hair could also inspire feelings of frustration ("when a curl will not hold") or even envy ("when their hair will not achieve what a friend's hair will") (175). These daily emotions of hairdressing will be familiar to most readers, too—readers who, thanks to this book, might now treat their own lived experience as seriously as Block implores us to do for the women who lived over a century ago.

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Notes

[1] Block's first book was even more explicitly grounded in fashion studies. See Elizabeth L. Block, *Dressing Up: The Women Who Influenced French Fashion* (MIT Press, 2021).