



Stephanie Buck [Follow](#)

Senior writer at @Timeline_now. In a relationship with: culture, design, unconvention. Closet extrov...

Dec 12, 2016 · 4 min read

The protest haircut that defied the guillotine during the French Revolution

Off with their hair!





Pierre-Narcisse Guérin's Portrait of a Young Girl (1812).

The young aristocrats danced. Some women wore gauzy Roman tunics. They ate sherbet and drank punch between waltzes. They sang.

Both men and women had chopped their hair close to the nape of the neck. It was the style, a nod to victims of the French guillotine whose hair was shorn before execution. Some even wore red scarves around their neck, a gory symbol of the fatal slice.

As the men bowed to their dance partners, they snapped their heads down sharply—mimicking decapitated heads dropping into a basket.

The French Revolution had taken their family members, and these parties functioned as elaborate wakes—bacchanals complete with gruesome sartorial tributes to the dead.

At *bals à la victime* (victims' balls), the sons and daughters of executed French aristocrats danced in bizarre revelry. In the 1830s, French historian Théophile Lavallée wrote of the events, “at which one danced in mourning clothes, and to which only individuals whose relatives had perished on the scaffold were admitted.” The fêtes soon became so popular people snuck in with false credentials of dead family members.

“France is dancing,” wrote 19th century historians and brothers Edmond and Jules Goncourt. “She dances to avenge, she dances to forget! Between her bloody past and her dark future, she dances! Scarcely saved from the guillotine, she dances...France, still bloodied and all ruined,

turns and pirouettes and spins about in an immense and mad farandole.”

Under intense scrutiny, any parties the elite had during the revolution were widely criticized and propagandized for the revolutionary agenda.

Despite many historical accounts of the *bals à la victime*, few are first-hand. In fact, the morbid events became a sort of urban legend, after-the-fact totems of the aristocracy. “The victims’ ball stood for the apathy of fashionable Parisians in the face of a bad republican government,” wrote history professor Ronald Schechter. The real *bals à la victime* probably functioned more as elaborate support groups than the *Eyes Wide Shut* soirées of popular imagination.

Les Titus et les Cache-folie.



Le Bon Genre. N° 39.

And in a historical irony, the severe *coiffure à la victime* hairstyle probably originated among the revolutionaries themselves, then evolved as a general fashion trend, and finally, became a symbol of ruling-class decadence.

In the early 1790s, Republican men cropped their hair short to imitate the style of Roman emperor busts, a celebration of democratic antiquity. The style became known as the *coiffure à la Titus*.

A few years later, women adopted the style, shearing their hair into messy spikes. “What had been intended as a signifier of male devotion to a Republican France was fundamentally transformed by the women who took part in the style,” wrote Jessica Larson in her paper *Usurping Masculinity: The Gender Dynamics of the Coiffure à la Titus in Revolutionary France* (2003).

Immediately these women were called “disfigured” and “unsexed,” but the style still went mainstream. Noble-born Thérèse Cabarrus, known as the *reine de la mode* (queen of fashion), popularized the look described as “short and frizzed all round her head, in the fashion then called *à la Titus*.” In 1802 the *Journal de Paris* reported that more than half of fashionable and wealthy women had either cut their hair or wore a wig *à la Titus*.

The smart set had co-opted the revolutionary look. The heads the Republicans wanted rolling were now wearing the style.

Once the *coiffure à la Titus* had become a universal style, it was easy for propagandists to sensationalize—or falsify—its meaning. In 1925 historian Louis Madelin wrote of the heartless parties of greedy capitalists. Those who danced and wore the *coiffure à la victime* were the antithesis of radical revolution, which fought to end feudalism and institute a liberal democracy.

It was simple to misattribute the *coiffure*. The same people who were allegedly dancing to the theme of execution happened to be wearing short hair. Thus, as far as history was concerned, the *à la Titus* became the *à la victime*.

Not surprisingly, it was mostly women who were criticized for these “cold-blooded” fashion statements, when in reality they were probably just following a fad. “The style existed for awhile as a negotiation be-

tween women's desires for the unconventional cut and men's extreme distaste for the same irregular conventions," wrote Larson. A once-radical haircut *à la Titus* had become a universal feminist success, but simultaneously rendered women extremely vulnerable.

Though the cut was real, the *coiffure à la victime* simplified (and actually reversed) its origins. Slanted historians effectively painted a callous French aristocracy with one crooked sense of humor. Only recently have historians noticed the holes in the research.

Now the parties, rituals, and haircuts make for rich campfire stories, not to mention another lesson in fake news.

