
The Conservation of Two Human Hair Wigs of Baroque Holy Child Sculptures

by Kimberleigh Collins-Peynaud

Introduction

It is widely accepted by historians writing about the origins of the devotion to the Holy Child that the first image of the Infant Jesus, used in the first nativity scene, came from the vision of St. Francis of Assisi on the night of Christmas 1223.

This isolated image of Jesus as a fragile infant, cared for and protected by St. Francis, underlines the human aspect of Jesus, particularly humility and poverty, creating an intimate link between the faithful and God. Over the centuries, Holy Child sculptures have had many functions with the main goal being to bring the faithful closer to God through contemplation and meditation using the senses and imagination of the individual.

Numerous songs, poems, and material offerings of jewelry, richly decorated clothing, and even human hair wigs made from hair of the faithful are evidence of this intimate interaction with the sculpture. These practices are still common in several Catholic communities around the world today.

Briefly put, these sculptures were used as tools for divine intervention (protection, benediction, healing or guaranteeing fertility to young women, for example), pedagogical objects to teach young noble girls to care for their Holy Child, preparing them for their future role of mother, and symbols of social status in the community when a faithful family was allowed to host the Holy Child sculpture of the church in their home for a limited amount of time.

They were also used for propaganda, indirectly reinforcing the idea of obedience, respect, dependence, and reverence of the people to its government in some situations, and for converting some communities to Catholicism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular.

Additionally, one of the most important functions of the Holy Child, if not the most important, since the majority of these sculptures originate in monasteries and convents, is that they served as a symbol of the mystical marriage between a young nun and God.

During the seventeenth century in Spain, it was common for a male member of a noble family (father or uncle) to commission a Holy Child sculpture that he would offer to his daughter or niece upon her entrance into the convent, to protect her virginity and guarantee her education. According to tradition, the girls, aged from 2 to 6 (they were married between 13 and 17), received 3 objects: a basket of sewing notions, a crucifix, and a Holy Child sculpture.

For many of these very young girls, the sculpture represented the only contact she would have with a man, either until marriage or death, not having outside

contact with family once in the convent. If the young girl prepared herself for marriage, the Holy Child symbolically represented her virginity and implied that she was ready to raise children. When the young fiancée left the convent she could keep the Holy Child as a souvenir of her link to her family or as a pedagogical tool to raise her own future children. Often they were donated to the convent because the husband refused to take them into his home.

If the young girl remained in the convent, destined to become a nun, she kept and cared for her Holy Child sculpture (which became a symbol of her mystical marriage with Jesus for her stature was the equivalent of the wife of God, Father and Son). In this way, the sculpture, often called “Husband”, became symbolically the husband and the son of the nun.

The nuns invested themselves both physically and psychologically in the care of their Holy Child sculptures. They made and repaired rich silk clothing and accessories for them that were embroidered with gold and silver thread, including shoes, socks and underwear, to clothe the sculpture. In Flanders, Germany, Italy and Spain the nuns were encouraged to caress them, cuddle them, kiss them, bathe them, walk them and play with them.

Many different rituals and religious festivities and processions during the Catholic calendar implied preparations of these sculptures, much like ones still practiced today.

One example of these practices includes a seventeenth-century sculpture of the Virgin Mary from the Cathedral of Tudela in Northern Spain. There are documented accounts of two different wigs used for this sculpture: the everyday wig was made of blond hair cut from Maria Rosa Arregui when she was 7 years old and the processional wig was made of brown hair from Maria Alava, cut when she was 15 on May 31st, 1921. A silk ribbon sewn into the wig bears a poem written by her uncle to dedicate the offering of her hair to the Virgin Mary, asking for protection in return.

Human hair wigs can be extremely important symbolic offerings to these objects of devotion, tangible evidence of the very intimate bond between the sculpture and the faithful. The fact that these sculptures are still displayed and used in similar contexts in many countries today underlines the significance of these Holy Child sculptures and their wigs.

At the end of the seventeenth century, the hair of devotional sculptures, was more frequently added on than sculpted. These sculptures were completed by wigs made of horse hair, human hair and silk, and made by artisans, nuns, or monks. Many of these wigs and accessories in religious settings have been replaced over time, much like the clothing, in order to maintain the overall appearance of the sculptures.

The Conservation of Two Human Hair Wigs of Baroque Holy Child Sculptures, continued

The Holy Child Sculptures

The two Holy Child devotional Baroque sculptures that were conserved belong to the collection of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Chaumont in eastern France, acquired from the collection of Miss Lucie Jacquinot in 1971. No documentation exists as to the origin and date of their manufacture; the Jacquinot family acquired objects over many years from various sources including antique shops, public sales, well-known flea markets, and sales of art objects belonging to local abbeys after the separation of Church and State.

The first wig belongs to the Holy Child under a Canopy, a composite wooden polychrome sculpture assembled during the twentieth century, consisting of a late seventeenth to early eighteenth-century polychrome wood Holy Child sculpture and an eighteenth-century Italian wood polychrome altarpiece with attached fragments of seventeenth-century gilt leather from the Netherlands

The assembly of these elements created a new work of art and therefore conditions its interpretation and conservation. The first element of the ensemble is a Holy Child of the Passion wearing a human hair wig without its typical accessories: the cross, a basket with the symbols of the Passion, and possibly clothing. The technical and artistic quality of the Holy Child is remarkable when compared to the majority of Holy Child sculptures produced during the Baroque period.

The country of origin of the sculpture itself could not be determined as the iconographic theme was very popular in Spain and Italy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it exhibits stylistic traits and materials found in both countries. Both materials, artwork, and artists circulated very frequently between the two regions.

This is also the case with the human hair wig. Opinions from several art historians and curators vary as to whether the wig is original to the sculpture.

The second sculpture, the Holy Child Savior of the World, a wood polychrome sculpture and base with silk dress, is thought to date from seventeenth-century Spain, based on stylistic comparisons with similar, documented Holy Child sculptures. Its original polychrome layer is consistent with seventeenth-century Spanish baroque techniques and materials as well.

In this case, there is some evidence that the wig is not original. There are several holes at the top of the head (one of which is 1 cm in diameter and 4 cm deep) where typically the stem of a precious, decorative metal halo, nimbus, or crown would be inserted, as seen on earlier seventeenth-century sculptures. As well, four smaller holes following a central line from forehead to crown exist, possibly made to attach a wig or other accessory to the head. No holes are found in the fabric structure of the wig.



Holy Child under a Canopy



Holy Child Savior of the World

In addition, there is a number stamped on the interior of the fabric, possibly corresponding to a size, suggesting that this wig was made in an artisanal workshop. The wig is therefore likely a later addition, possibly to replace an earlier one that had gone out of style or that was in poor condition.

The Conservation of Two Human Hair Wigs of Baroque Holy Child Sculptures, continued

Condition of the Wigs

Prior to treatment, both sculptures had been stored for approximately 30 years in an uncontrolled environment exposed to dust and pests. The wigs were askew and distorted. No evidence of former interventions was noted during observation under microscope at 50–200X magnification.

Materials and techniques of fabrication

Microscopic examination confirmed that the hair used in both wigs is human. The ends of the curls examined show that they were cut straight with scissors.

The wig of the Holy Child under a Canopy consists of brown human hair, cotton thread, and iron wire. The mass of shoulder-length curled hair, varying from 5 to 17 cm in length, is attached to a wire structure, approximately 15 cm in diameter, in the general form of a flower that fits the form of the crown of the head of the Holy Child.

This wig is held in place with an iron nail 1 cm in length protruding from the top of the head behind the hairline.



Curling the hair

was most likely achieved using tools of the period such as a curling iron or curlers. Samples of the hairs were sent to the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris where Catherine Orliac, objects conservator, noted traces of a very fine transparent substance on the hairs corresponding most likely to a spray applied to the hair during or after curling, to preserve the form of each curl.

The wig of the Holy Child Savior of the World consists of blond curled human hair at shoulder length with a slight part down the middle. The hair was attached by cotton thread to a cotton textile base made of more than one piece of fabric sewn together to form the base. This stitching appears to



be made by machine. The presence of a stamped number (10?) in black ink on the interior base of the wig, as well as the regularity of the stitching, suggests that this wig was produced in different sizes by an artisan wig-maker.

A greenish powder-like substance was observed on the hair, in particular on the top of the head. This could possibly be a substance used to clean the hair prior to use on the wig or residue of a treatment using indigo in the prevention of yellowing of light-colored hair, a technique documented by colonial wigmakers in Williamsburg, Virginia during the eighteenth century. This same account mentions the use of fine sand and saw dust, among other materials, and the boiling, drying, and even baking of hair wigs in rye bread loaves, in order to completely clean the hair for use in wigs. The green powdery substance was not analyzed.

Both wigs exhibited similar soiling and deterioration. A great deal of dust and debris was found, in particular on the tops of the wigs and throughout the curls. Signs of pest infestation were evident in the form of several carcasses and dried traces of larvae of hair-eating insects in both wigs. As a consequence, many hairs were broken, very fragile, and extremely dirty.

The traces of spray on the Holy Child under a Canopy was possibly a factor leading to even more stress on the hair, provoking further breakage and a certain stiffness. Many broken ends of hair, roughly 1–2 cm in length, were observed at the feet of both sculptures.

In the case of the wig of the Holy Child under a Canopy, whole sections of hair, starting at the base of the wig, were detached as a consequence of insect attack. These pieces were simply lying on top of the mass of dirty hair. The iron wire of this same wig, as well as its cotton thread, seemed to be in stable condition despite the presence of dirt, dust, and small areas of rust on the iron wire. The fabric base and cotton threads of the wig of the Holy Child Savior of the World were also in good condition despite dirt and dust collection.

Conservation Treatment

Both wigs were first given anoxic treatment to kill any larvae.

Because of the very fragile state of the hair of the Holy Child under a Canopy, each curl was noted on a drawing of the wig in order to mark where any detached hair belonged if removed during cleaning. The strands of hair, some broken half way, some near the metal base, were being held in place only by being slightly entangled with other curls. The breakage appeared to be a result of insect attack. The Holy Child Savior of the World did not present evidence of the same problem.

The wigs were then mechanically cleaned with soft brushes and a micro-vacuum cleaner on very low power in order to remove dried larvae and carcasses of insects, superficial

The Conservation of Two Human Hair Wigs of Baroque Holy Child Sculptures, continued

debris, and the tiny broken pieces of hair measuring 1–2 cm in length. Stubborn traces of insect matter stuck to some strands of hair were removed with dampened cotton swabs.

Consolidation of the broken strands of hair was not attempted because of the likelihood of entrapping the dust and hairspray residue. The location of detached curls was noted and they were preserved wrapped loosely in acid-free tissue paper.

Dirt, grime, and residue on both wigs remained after a preliminary cleaning, leaving the curls stiff and dull in appearance and texture. To minimize handling during cleaning, the wigs were attached very loosely to small plastic sieves using nylon string in a few pre-existing holes. The plastic supported the hair, allowing the strands to hang vertically while drying and for air to circulate freely. Tests were carried out in order to find the most appropriate cleaning methods. They included:

- baby shampoo (suggested by Florence Cherbetian of the Musee de la Poupée in Paris) - which removed grime and left the hair shiny and flexible but introduced the risks of residues;
- white spirit, followed with a rinse of isooctane - had no effect on the grime;
- isopropanol - had a very subtle effect on the hair, leaving it slightly shinier and flexible but the scales on the cuticle seemed more visible, possibly due to the action of rubbing the swab on the hair;
- a mixture of water and ethanol 50/50 - had the same outcome as the isopropanol;
- water alone - proved to be effective, leaving the cotton swab dark gray with dirt and the strands of hair supple and shiny.

A drop of non-ionic detergent Triton X100 was added to the water for a cleaning test giving the best result. All of the dust and dirt were removed in one action leaving the hair shiny and very flexible, even revealing the true color of the hair: a lighter reddish brown, rather than dark brown. This was chosen to be the cleaning method.

To avoid abrading and damaging the cuticle by rubbing, it was decided to perform the cleaning by bathing each curl in the fluid receptacle of an ultrasonic humidifier. This method avoided all mechanical action on the strand of hair and allowed for cleaning without pulling on already damaged hairs, avoiding breakage or detachment.

The hair was soaked in the bath, curl by curl, two to four minutes depending on the needs of each curl. The entire wig could not be fully soaked in the bath because of the presence of iron in the wig of the Holy Child under a Canopy and because of the presence of ink on the fabric support of the wig of the Holy Child Savior of the World.



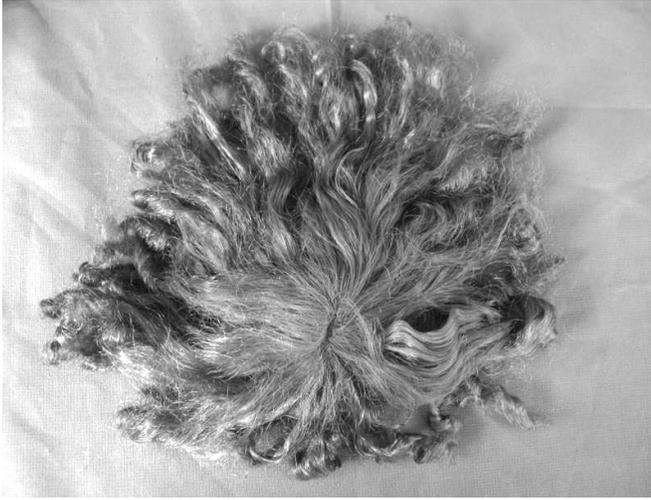
This method allowed for a slow and careful treatment, without needing to care for all the curls at once. The cleaning mixture was changed and renewed very frequently, as soon as the water in the receptacle became dirty. The cleaned curl was rinsed with demineralized water in a separate container, then wrapped around a soft foam curler, as close as possible to the size of the original curl, and allowed to air dry.

All of the dust, dirt, and residue seem to have been fully eliminated leaving the hair shiny and more flexible. No curls were undone during the cleaning. Once the curled hair was dry, the foam curler was removed and the curl was very lightly arranged by hand in order to restore volume to the curl. No detangling was performed which might have caused the loss of hairs. The restored flexibility of the hair held the curls extraordinarily well: it was therefore judged unnecessary to apply any type of adhesive or fixative to keep the shape.

The wig of the Holy Child Savior of the World was in much better overall condition in terms of strength and flexibility of individual hair strands. Although the curls had become deformed, there were very few breaks in strands and no loose strands lying entangled in other strands. For these reasons, a test by swabbing was undertaken on one curl and the cuticles of the hairs observed under microscope were unchanged.

The cleaning was performed by soaking the curls one by one in a receptacle. A light cotton swab was used when judged necessary using the same cleaning mixture, cleaning curl by curl. A sheet of absorbent paper was placed underneath each curl during cleaning and rinsing until the paper showed no more signs of dirt and grime. The cleaning mixture was renewed frequently. Rinsing and drying were performed in the same manner as for the first wig. The cotton support of the wig was superficially cleaned with demineralized water on cotton swabs and left to air dry on the plastic sieve support in order to conserve the shape.

The Conservation of Two Human Hair Wigs of Baroque Holy Child Sculptures, continued



After treatment of the wig of The Holy Child under a Canopy, the sculpture with wig was replaced in the altarpiece. A removable wedge was inserted beneath the foot of the sculpture to allow positioning of the figure to avoid contact of the wig against the gilt leather.



The wig of the Holy Child Savior of the World was replaced upon the head of the treated Holy Child as well, now having a slightly better fit than before conservation.

Discussion

It is unfortunate that little documentation exists regarding the production and the stylistic and technical differences, according to date and region, of these Baroque devotional sculptures. This can be attributed to the fact that they are not considered to be on the same level as other devotional religious sculpture commissioned by the Church or the wealthy, so little effort has been made to include them in art historical studies.

As long as these objects are considered in this manner, it is difficult to gather information about them, including the provenance, date, and fabrication techniques of the human hair wigs. From a conservator's point of view, guidelines for handling, storage, and treatment procedures of these hair objects would be very beneficial given the high number of similar objects in collections, churches, and monasteries, and given the impact they have on a large number of people who still use or display them.

