



Hairstyle, c. 1380–1410, France

Charlotte Zifcsak (Lady Mathilde)

Northern Lights
March, 2004

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Summary

Although the 15th century is often the focus of attention when it comes to hair and hair coverings, the late 14th c. is also a period with a wide array of hairstyles. An often-overlooked French style consists of very tightly curled, jaw-length hair. This is often depicted with a filet, although a bare head is also represented.

After trying this style with a curling iron, with mixed results, I set out to figure out a method that a medieval woman could have used. Obviously, she would not have had an electric curling iron at her disposal, beyond the fact that the silhouette was still not evocative of medieval illustrations. Rag curls were the answer.

Small sections of hair wrapped around strips of linen and left overnight produce a very small and tight curl. Once unwrapped, separating, teasing, and arranging the curls gives a mass of hair that looks very much like that of medieval illustrations. My hair is shoulder-blade length, and gives about the right length when curled. This length of hair is also sufficient to create the popular Gothic folded braids, allowing a woman to vary her hairstyle without changing the length of her hair.

Curls and ringlets were an ideal standard of beauty in the 14th c., as described by Boccaccio, who was

so skilful in choosing a short pointed phrase to bring out the distinctive nature of one of his characters, [he] contents himself by describing the beautiful Fiametta has having long golden curls falling on to her delicate white shoulders, a little round face in which the white of the lily and the vermilion of the rose were mingles; while, in another story, he describes two young girls, aged, perhaps, fifteen, who appeared in messer Neri's garden wearing their ringlets as blonde as gold threads set with the lightest of little garlands, so delicate in their beauty that they looked more like angels than anything else.¹

These particular ladies were depicted wearing their hair longer, when this was written c. 1350. But curls remained an ideal of beauty, as is evidenced in the many depictions of youthful women with curls in the illustrations below. This tightly curled style seems to be worn from c. 1380–1410, and potentially as late as 1420. It may have been the precursor to many 15th century styles where high horns of hair emanate from women's temples.

¹ Newton, p. 38.

The Process

Step 1 Roll hair tightly, with strips of linen, or other “rags”. Avoid rolling the curls too close to the center part of the hair. (I should have mine a little further from the part).



Step 2 Once roll is complete, tie snugly in single overhand knot. It is firm yet easy to remove.



Step 3 Roll as much hair as you want to include in the curly section. I have chosen to only roll the front sections of my hair.



A close-up of the rag rolls.



Step 4 After several hours (overnight is perfect), very gently, unroll the hair. These curls are very tight, and it is easy for hair to become tangled. Be sure to unroll all the way to the end of each strand; do not just pull out the rag.



All of the rags are unrolled, you can see the very tight curls that are achieved. In this picture, I have only unrolled the rags; I have not otherwise modified the hair.



Step 5 This is the part that requires the most art. Gently begin to separate each curl. Unlike modern hair, you are going for a “frizzy” look. Work through the hair until the right look is achieved. If you need to, you can tease the hair to the right shape. I try to avoid this, as it can take quite some time to get out.



Step 6 As I chose to not have the curls all around my head, I am braiding the rest of my hair in a contemporary style. Start the back braids as close behind or above the ear as possible.

Note: Steps 6, 7, and 8 are applicable to many late 14th century hairstyles.



Step 7 Pin the first braid into place.



Step 8 Pin the second braid into place, and tuck the ends of both braids in.

For my pins, I have purchased a pin based on London archaeological digs from 12th – 15th centuries². For my other pins, I cut brass wire to length, and filed the ends to a point.



² Egan et al, pp. 297-304

Pictorial Evidence

The only illustrations I could find of this style were from French manuscripts. Perhaps this was uniquely a French style, or it could also be a result of the wide variety of manuscripts available on-line from late 14th – early 15th c. France.



The original inspiration came from the hairstyle on the bride in the Marriage at Cana, from *Les Grandes Heures*, pl. 58. c. 1380. This version pairs the hairstyle with an ornamented filet

Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine how the back of the hair is arranged by most of the illustrations. There is nothing to suggest that the hair was not curled all the way around the back of the head.

In my re-creation, I discovered that the curls, and the process of removing the curls at the end of the day, can be very time consuming, and even damaging. I wanted a solution where I could achieve the look, but without curling all of my hair. I chose a solution from the contemporary hairstyle of the Gothic folded braid, where women were also crossing braids across the back of the head.

Salome's Dance from *Duc de Berry Petites Heures*, c. 1380. Accessed at http://www.bnf.fr/enluminures/images/jpeg/i7_0007.jpg



Another example from *Les Grandes Heures*, Pl. 55. Although it is difficult to make out on this scan, it appears that her hair has less of a “pouffy” look. This particular version may have been achieved by braiding the hair for waves, and would be appropriate for shorter hair.



From *Les Grandes Heures*. This version is worn with a filet and veil.

This example shows that a similar look was represented into the early 15th c. (1400-10).

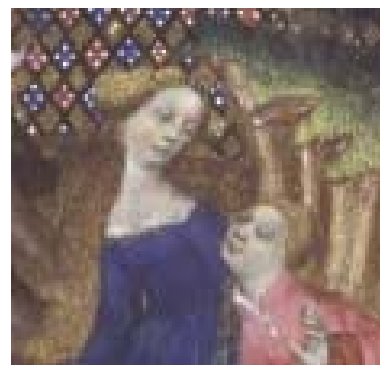
Hercule filant

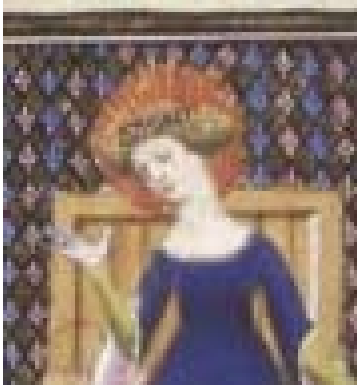
Cote: Français 598 , Fol. 33

Boccaccio, *Des claires et nobles femmes*,

France, Paris, 15th c. Accessed at:

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/scripts/ConsultationTout.exe?O=08100285>





Another early 15th c. example. This also includes a fillet.

Minerve

Cote : Français 598 , Fol. 13

Boccaccio, *Des claires et nobles femmes*

Another early 15th c. example.

Megullia dotée par ses amis

Cote : Français 598 , Fol. 83v

Boccaccio, *Des claires et nobles femmes*



This style is not exactly the same shape, but also could be achieved with the rag curls.

Exécution d'Olympias

Cote : Français 598 , Fol. 93v

Boccaccio, *Des claires et nobles femmes*



Early 15th century, worn with a crown. Again, slightly different silhouette. This demonstrates how one style can manifest itself in several different looks. I believe this is related to the same style, and could use a similar method.

Edgive et messagers

Cote : Français 73, Fol. 171v

Grandes Chroniques de France, France, Paris, c. 1400-1407. Accessed at:

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/scripts/ConsultationTout.exe?O=08100014>



This woman, again, is wearing a tightly curled style, this time with an early 15th century headdress. Note the mix of styles between the two women. The veiled style seems to have hair gathered up at the temples. This could be small buns, or sections of tightly curled hair, gathered into a “bun”?



Naissance de Louis VIII

Cote : Français 73, Fol. 263v

Grandes Chroniques de France

This is the closest we come to being able to see the back of this style. In this illustration, it seems as if the style goes all the way around the head. By this time, illustrations showing braids going across the back of the head have virtually disappeared as well. Note the high forehead that will become prominent in later 15th century styles.

Jacob et Laban

Cote : Français 9, Fol. 31v

Guiard des Moulins, Bible historique, France, Paris, early 15th c. Accessed at:

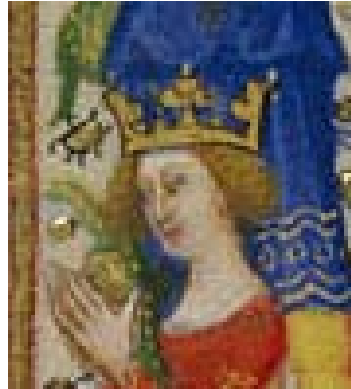
<http://gallica.bnf.fr/scripts/ConsultationTout.exe?O=08100028>



This example is even later than the Boccaccio, moving into the second and third decades of the 15th c. Worn with a crown, the frizzy mass of hair look could be achieved with tight rag curls.

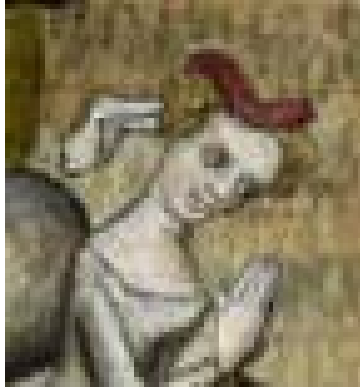
Saint Catherine Tended by the Angels and Visited by the Queen – Catherine's Martyrdom

Book of Hours Spitz Master, French, c. 1415 – 1425 Accessed at: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/objects/o110505.html>



This illustration from c. 1410 is contemporary with the look of the open hood. The red object near the shepherdess's feet could potentially be a hood. Perhaps this style of hair could have been worn under a hood?

Shepherdess with dog and flocks
Le Dit de la Pastoure, *Collected Works of Christine de Pisan*, Paris, 1410-1411
Accessed at:
<http://ibs001.colo.firstnet.net.uk/britishlibrary/controller/textsearch?text=Christine&idx=1&start=6>



Later on, the bundles of hair start to rise up higher on the head. This may have been a different method, but the tight masses of hair could be achieved by the same methods.

Lancelot menaçant Élizabel
Cote: Français 101, Fol. 173v
Tristan de Léonois, France, Paris, Early 15th
c. Accessed at:
<http://gallica.bnf.fr/scripts/ConsultationTout.exe?O=08100082>

The style continues to evolve, until it looks little like the original bride in the Marriage at Cana. This may or may not have been achieved using similar styling methods or elements of that method.

Christine de Pisan presenting her book to Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France.
Collected Works of Christine de Pisan Paris - Epître à la Reine Isabelle, 1410-1411 Accessed at:
<http://ibs001.colorado.firstnet.net.uk/britishlibrary/controller/textsearch?text=Christine&idx=1&start=11>



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Newton, Stella Mary. *Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince: A Study of the Years 1340 - 1365*. Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1999.

All other illustrations gathered from the web, as cited inline.