

Call for Papers

Global Histories of Hair, c. 1500–2026

An international, interdisciplinary conference, organised by the SNSF Starting Grant Team “Matter of Distinction: Early Modern Hair, Race, Trade, and Multispecies History” (Annika Bärwald, Laura Schleiss, Sarah-Maria Schober) at the University of Lucerne on October 8–10, 2026.

Hyper-present on almost all heads and bodies, hair is a forceful matter of difference. It signals gender, class, sometimes religion or politics – as well as racialised distinction. As such, hair connects and disconnects humans and other species across the globe and throughout history. The conference “Global Histories of Hair” aims to bring together researchers working on hair as a matter of distinction in the early modern and modern worlds.

One temporal focus is on the period between approximately 1500 and 1850, encapsulating the European and colonial “age of the wig”. Alongside various types of animal hair reaching their position as “commodities of empire” during this time, human hair was cut, collected and traded over long distances to be used on other people’s heads. In this process, hair and hair practices became an ever-clearer marker of increasingly essentialised and naturalised difference.

In a second step, the conference addresses the long-lasting hairy heritage of distinction making from 1500 to the present day. This includes the role of hair as human remains in anthropological collections as well as racialised regulations of hair or differences in hair care possibilities.

Contributions might address, but are not limited to, the following areas and questions:

Discourse, Knowledge, Practices:

- What role did hair play in the so-called “contact zone”, where Europeans commented upon and categorised hair and hair practices of others, while also being observed and often humorously commented upon themselves (for example because of their wearing of wigs and powder)?
- What did hair practices in different parts of the world actually look like?
- How were grooming techniques or practices of covering hair described, categorised, and also, in some contexts, enforced?

Materiality, Trade, Valuation:

- What role did aspects of hair materiality, such as hair colour, hair texture, hair strength, hair abundance and loss, play in the global sphere? How did the strands of hair materiality, hair knowledge and hair practices entangle or disentangle?
- How was hair collected, traded, valued and used in different regions of the world?
- How did the trade, circulation and usage of hair bring people (and other beings) together and separate them? In what ways did the human hair trade differ from or coalesce with the trade in other fibres?
- How was hair conceptualised and used by people in different regions as a naturecultural material? How were aspects of malleability or essentialisation visualised or hidden, and for what purpose? How did hair contribute to understandings of the increasing separation of nature and culture, and both of these aspects' respective roles in distinction making?

Intersectionality:

- How did ideas about racial, gender-based, religious or class-based hair differences affect people around the globe?
- What forms of expression, or even resistance, did hair care provide to people experiencing inequality and suppression?

Heritage:

- How have lasting hairy heritages affected people and their bodies around the globe since 1500?
- What attempts have been made to de-essentialise hair? What are ways of unmaking hair distinctions?

Presentations are scheduled for 20 minutes, with ample time allocated for discussion. We invite researchers from all relevant fields, such as history, art history, anthropology as well as museum and collection professionals and archivists. Early-career scholars are strongly encouraged to apply. The conference will take place in Lucerne, Switzerland. Travel, accommodation and visa costs will be covered, and organisational assistance will be provided. Hybrid attendance is possible. The conference language is English.

Please submit an abstract (c. 250 words) and a short biography (c. 100 words). The deadline for submissions is **May 15, 2026**.

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