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Fabricating Wigs for *Madama Butterfly*

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An integral part of the costumes for Madama Butterfly are the Japanese Geisha wigs. With a chorus of Geisha along with other principals the total wig count for the production was over 20. Budgetary restraints precluded buying or even renting these stylized wigs. Constructing from scratch was the affordable solution.

Traditional Kabuki wigs are constructed on hammered copper bases that are riveted together. Hair is then hand sewn onto white silk one hair at a time to simulate a natural hairline. Padding of ratted up hair is used to give the wig its distinctive shape.

For our purposes, we deconstructed inexpensive costume wigs and straightened out the hair wefts with a steam iron. For a solid base we used Fosshape. This felt-like material can be molded and shaped like hat felt. Once hardened, the hairline shape is cut and the form sprayed black.

To give the characteristic Geisha shape to the finished wig, areas of the base are built up with padding made of black tights stuffed with polyester batting. Working from research photos, these various shaped pieces are hot glued to the base according to the style of the wig.

The wefts of straightened hair can now be glued to the inside edge of the base. Once the hairline is completed, styling can begin. During all steps it is important to make every attempt to keep the hair smooth and tangle free so that the surface retains its shine. It is only a thin layer of hair that covers the padding but gives the impression of luxurious and voluminous locks. Sections of hair are combed and carefully laid over the foundation and padding. These are held in place with twist tape until they can be secured with low temperature hot glue. The extra length is worked into the final top-knot decoration. Extra care is needed to also make sure the foundation is covered with the hair.

For added support, wefts of hair are glued to hardened pieces of fosshape to create the intricate loops and puffs of some styles.

Once decorated with hair sticks, flowers, and combs, the wig becomes the punctuation of the classic Geisha look in a Japanese Garden or on the set of the Dreamworks film Dreamer.