

Skin Deep

Rapunzels Of a Certain Age

By SALLY WADYKA

It just got harder to judge a woman's age by the length of her hair. Not so long ago if you found yourself walking behind a woman with soft curls reaching below her shoulders, you could guess with 99 percent certainty that she was younger than 40, probably a lot younger.

But now you could very well be wrong.

If you flip through a recent issue of *More* magazine — which is for women over 40 — you will find page after page of mature women unabashedly sporting the long sexy locks formerly

Women over 40 are defying the old rules about cropped hair.

reserved for ingénues. Just a handful wear the kind of short cuts women of a certain age were once encouraged to adopt.

"Why not?" asked Lois Joy Johnson, the magazine's beauty and fashion director. "We're as daring with our hair now as we are with everything else after 40."

These days even women who keep their hair trimmed somewhere around chin length — in many cases because their hair is too thin or fine to wear longer — are adding longer, softer layers. "I do a style I call the short long haircut that's feminine and versatile without going below the shoulders," said Patrick Melville, an owner and the creative director of the Warren-Tricomi salon in New York.

Fashion is one explanation. With the pendulum swinging toward ultra-feminine, sometimes downright girlish styles, hair was sure to follow. What better look to go with this summer's neo-hippie bohemian skirts and blouses than long tousled hair?

Like those clothes, the long hair harks back to the 1970's, when styles immortalized by Farrah Fawcett and the other two original *Charlie's Angels* — Kate Jackson and Jaclyn Smith — were in themselves a soft, feminine reaction to the short cuts

popular in the 60's (when women were announcing their collective re-entry into the workplace).

This time improved styling technologies in conditioning products, brushes and blow-dryers allow women to have even softer tresses. "The cuts are better, women have gotten more skilled at blow-drying, and there are so many great products that women who may have thought they couldn't pull off long hair in the past can now," said Renee Cohen, a stylist at the Lépine New York salon on Madison Avenue.

But the trend is not just about accessorizing this season's clothes or advances in hair care. It seems to be part of a much larger shift in how women in their 40's, 50's and beyond think about — or forget about — their age. Once upon a time women followed the unwritten rule that when you hit midlife you should make a date with the scissors. Long hair, it was said, exerted too strong a gravitational pull on the face, accentuating wrinkles. Long hair was a sign a woman was not properly acting her age.

But long hair cut as it is now in soft layers does not necessarily add weight to an aging face. And the notion that women should act their age has been replaced with something like Mae West's belief that "you're never too old to become younger."

Or at least to remain as young as you have always been. For many women long hair is a signature that is identified with them more as decades pass. (Ms. Fawcett, for one, still wears her hair long.)

"I swore that when I turned 50, I would have short hair again, because that seemed like the appropriate age to cut it," said Nancy Hessel Webber, 56, a style and design editor based in New York. "But 50 came and went, and I realized I had no real desire to give up the length. It works with my style, and it makes me feel more feminine."

Even women who have taken the traditional route to marriage and family and maybe the house in the suburbs are no longer willing to conform to the short-haired soccer mom stereotype. The cast of "Desperate Housewives" is a case in point: Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman and Marcia Cross are all over 40, all have long hair and they play three of the sexiest moms around.

"I'm a mom, but I don't want to



BLOWING IN THE WIND Nancy Hessel Webber kept her long tresses though 50 came and went.

Elizabeth Lippman for The New York Times

look matronly," said Betsey Berg, 46, a talent agent at the William Morris Agency in New York. "I love that when my son was 6 he wrote a poem all about my beautiful long hair. Another mom asked me when I was going to cut my hair, and I said, 'Never!' Or at least not until I absolutely have to, which I guess will be when I get gray and wrinkled."

"Forty is the new 30," said Ms. Cohen, the stylist, explaining why she could not imagine advising celebrities like Sarah Jessica Parker, Cheryl Crow or Julianne Moore that the time had come for a short cut.

Kevin Lee, the creative director at the Kenneth's salon in the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, uses the example of Demi Moore. "She's the perfect example of the new 30," he said. "Is she too old to pull off that long hair? No. She looks fabulous."

Long hair is a long-running trend. Not since Linda Evangelista's ubiquitous boyish crop in the 90's have short cuts really been chic, and hair has been inching downward ever since. Just try to find a model who

does not have hair below her shoulders. "Ever since Gisele came on the runway with her long layered sexy hair, that's been the ideal for women," said Jimmy Paul, a Manhattan-based hair stylist, referring to the 25-year-old Victoria's Secret model Gisele Bündchen.

The trend is still going strong. The number of new shampoos and conditioners that were introduced for long hair more than doubled from 2003 to 2004, and it looks as if it will at least double again this year, according to the global new products database of the Mintel International Group.

Long hair can send a sexual message more potent than that of a short cut. "There is lots of research to show that men prefer long hair and that it's associated with sexual desirability," said Dr. Debbie Then, a Los Angeles-based psychologist who specializes in physical appearance. Picture how the classic movie sex scene unfolds: the woman unclips her hair and the man watches it tumble seductively down her back. "Long hair is very alluring to the senses," Dr. Then said. "Men like it because they

can touch it, smell it, run their fingers through it." In addition to looking youthful and sexy, many women in their 40's and older maintain a long mane imbues them with confidence. Call it a security blanket if you like, but there is no denying the comfort of having a little something to hide behind. Cynics might cite the ability of long hair to conceal brow furrows, wrinkles or even plastic surgery scars as the reason older women cling to it. Or is it that long hair helps put off the need to have plastic surgery at all?

"Hair is a very sexy accessory that can flirt with the face, a little bit on, a little bit off, a little to cover the crow's feet," Ms. Johnson of *More* magazine said. "We all know that horrible feeling of cutting your hair and suddenly feeling exposed."

"My hair has always been long, and it's how I know me," said Jane Ives, 55, who recently agreed to lose two precious inches but still has hair that reaches nearly to the middle of her back.

Might all this hair be an attempt to stave off the inevitable? Perhaps

Tips From Pros

THERE is a difference between a chic longer look and one that has remained unchanged since high school, especially when high school was decades ago. Here is what the experts say about wearing long hair after 40.

ADD LAYERS All-one-length long hair can visually pull the face down, making it look older. "A face-framing cut softens the whole line of the face, the cheeks and jaw line," said Kevin Lee, the creative director of the Kenneth's salon at the Waldorf-Astoria. Layers also let the hair move more freely.

GIVE IT A SOFT, RELAXED CURL Stick-straight strands also add weight to the picture, while a little volume and wave lighten it up. Use a couple of large Velcro rollers at the crown while you blow-dry to add volume, said Patrick Melville, an owner of the Warren-Tricomi salon in New York. "If your hair has its own wave, let it dry more naturally to take advantage of that softness," he advised. "Or use a curling iron to add a little wave to the layers around the face."

TRY BANGS They can not only hide forehead wrinkles but also take 10 years off your face, said Renee Cohen, a stylist at Lépine New York. "Sexy long bangs that are swept to the side look incredibly youthful but can still be sophisticated," she said.

TREAT YOUR HAIR WELL Hair becomes drier with age, so one key to wearing it long is to keep it healthy. Get trims every eight weeks and condition it regularly.

MAKE CONCESSIONS TO THINNING HAIR Very thin hair really should be kept no longer than about chin length, stylists say. And to create the illusion of density layer it very gently, with just a few soft lengths to frame the face.

TRUST THE MIRROR (and your stylist). Just because Goldie Hawn is pulling off her long, tousled mane of blond hair at 59 doesn't mean everyone can. "If you feel like your hair is starting to pull you down at all, it's not making you look good, and you should make a change," Mr. Lee said. "But you don't have to give up your femininity. You can still have a shorter cut that has a long feel." SALLY WADYKA

partly. "Everything negative is associated with aging, and women want to avoid that for as long as possible," Dr. Then said. "If you look more youthful, you feel more youthful. It's a domino theory: when you feel better about how you look, you interact in a more positive way with those around you."

There is still, of course, such a thing as too long. It is the rare woman — of any age — who can pull off waist-length locks. "Don't go for Cher hair," Mr. Lee of Kenneth's said. "It has worked for her, but I can't think of anyone else who could make that look work."



Kathy Wilton/Associated Press

GLAMOROUS MANES From left, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross, Eve Lorigo, Teri Hatcher and Nicolette Sheridan of "Desperate Housewives."

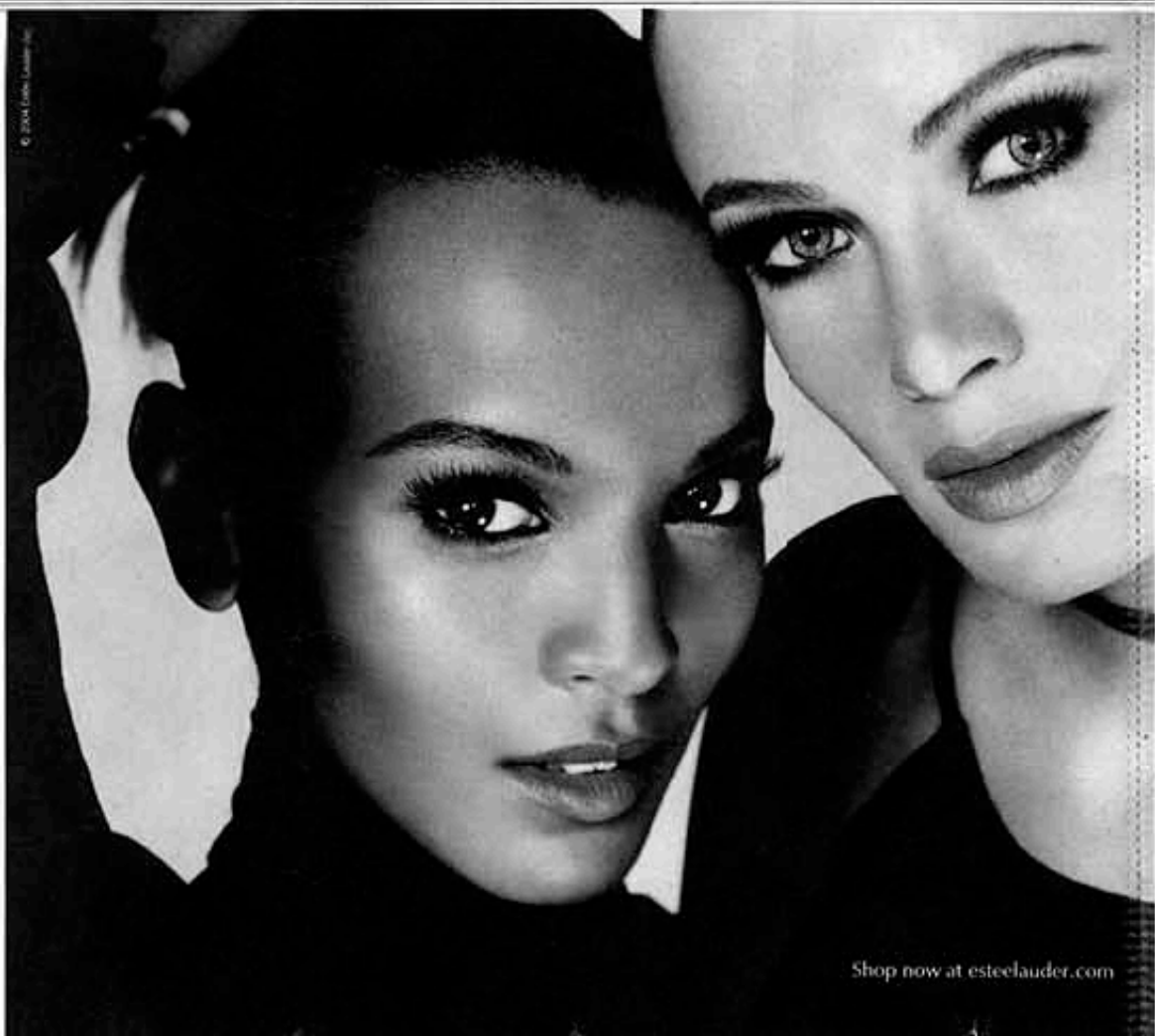
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