

Adorning the Body

You are at a banquet where wealthy noblewomen are wearing finely made clothing and jewelry.

Ancient Egyptians wore light and simple clothing. This clothing was usually made from a soft cloth called *linen*, which weavers created from the plant fiber *flax*. The average Egyptian man dressed in a length of cloth wrapped around the waist and a plain shirt he slipped over his head. Women wore long skirts or sleeveless dresses, sometimes topped by a square cloth used as a shawl. Wealthy Egyptians wore clothes similar in style to lower-class people, but the clothes were made of better fabric. Ordinary people wore all white clothing, while rich people could afford to pay for dyes that created colorful gold and yellow garments.

Men and women, both rich and poor, wore jewelry. Jewelry served both decorative and magical purposes. Besides being pretty, some jewelry pieces were worn as *amulets*, or charms, and were believed to protect the wearer from harm. Gold and semiprecious stones such as *carnelian*, *lapis lazuli*, and *turquoise* were used to create very valuable pieces. Many Egyptians wore earrings, broad collars with strands of beads, pectorals (chest adornments), bracelets, armbands, rings, and anklets.

Ancient Egyptians paid great attention to their hair. Some people dyed their hair with *henna*, a red dye made from powdered plant leaves. Others cut their hair very short or shaved their heads completely. Wealthy people owned elaborate wigs made from human hair. As an added adornment, people tied cones of scented animal fat, or *perfumed pomades*, to their wigs. The fat would melt and slide down the wig, giving off an attractive scent.

Ancient Egyptian men and women also adorned themselves with cosmetics, both for fashion and for protection from the weather. They used perfumed oils to soften their skin and keep it from burning and cracking in the hot desert climate. They colored their eyelids with a green substance made from a soft stone called *malachite*. They outlined their eyes with black *kohl*, a substance of lead ore mixed with water. This was done to make the eyes look larger and to protect them from the glare of the sun. Since some of these substances had antibacterial properties, they also helped protect the wearers from diseases.

Discussion Question: How did ancient Egyptians dress?