

# QUEENS NEIGHBORHOODS

Phone items to 718-575-2550  
Fax 718-793-6422

## In Wig Biz, He's the Mane Man

By Nancy A. Ruhling  
STAFF WRITER

One flight up. Two flights up. Three flights up. Right to the top of the staircase, where the Long Island City studio opens up a panoramic view of Manhattan that makes you feel like you're on top of the world.

But before you have a chance to admire the scenery, almost before you can catch your breath and certainly before you've had time to so much as get a word of introduction out, he does all the talking for you.

"Hair," declares the man with the shoulder-length mane of gray that he keeps running his fingers through Samson-like as if to stand up for his ideas strand by strand, "says a lot about a person. It is political — think of the Southern belle with the big bouffant who always has to look her best, or the northern woman who is a professional, doesn't wear much make-up and is not afraid to go to work with her hair wet. It is youth, it is virility, it is sexual, it is the easiest way for a woman to believe that she can put a control on the happening we face every day — aging."

The monologue continues in the same fascinating vein from the one man who knows more about every single hair on your head than you ever will and who can't wait to tell you all about it.

Meet wigmaker Raffaele — "Everybody knows me as Ralph" — Mollica.

"I am an artist," he says as he paces the studio. "The way we make the wig artistically, we try to copy the philosophy of the original. We try to do it just like God. Wigmaking combines tailoring — fitting the cap to the head; weaving — inserting the hair; and hairdressing — cutting and styling it. If a trip to the beauty salon is like getting a physical, making a Ralph wig is like neurosurgery."

And every single choice, just like every single strand of hair, is of the utmost importance, he says. The human hair, which is imported from all over the world, is examined, and damaged parts, such as split ends, are removed. Clients are given consultations so Ralph can determine the appropriate color, texture and style of the wig and so he can create a fitted cap.

To achieve the correct color, Ralph uses his own dyes (sorry, they're a trade secret) and combines different shades by blending the strands on an ancient apparatus that looks like a miniature bed of nails. After the hair is woven into the cap, the wig is cut and styled to the customer's specifications.

Making a Ralph wig is a delicate operation that

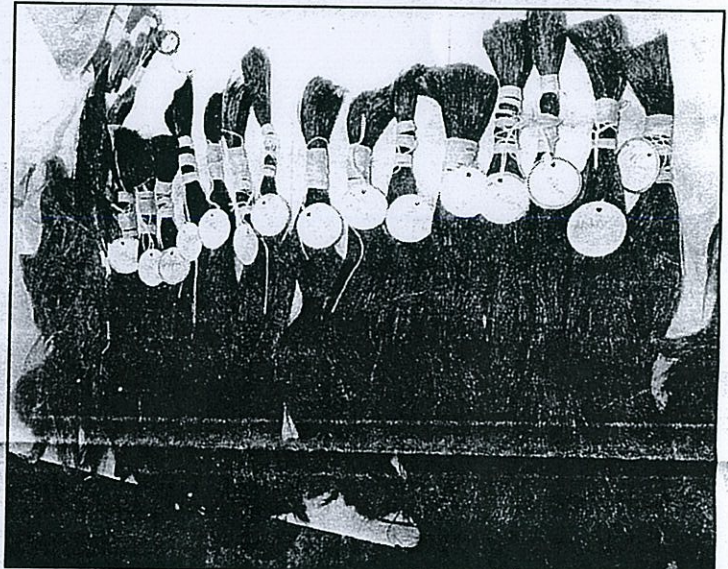
requires infinite patience, steady hands and nerves of steel. To demonstrate, he holds a skein of light brown hair up to the sunlight and chooses a half-dozen strands. After making a loop at the top that is all but invisible to the neophyte's untrained eye, he uses an instrument that looks like a dental pick and painstakingly attaches the hair a single piece at a time. At this pace, it takes one to four weeks to produce a whole head of hair that looks so natural that sometimes even Ralph can't answer the classic hairdressing question, "Does she or doesn't she?"

Although Ralph started out making wigs for high-style stylists (Kenneth, Elizabeth Arden, Vidal Sas-

such demand that he has a six-month waiting list. (Medical patients, however, are always put at the top of the list, he says.)

But don't reach for your telephone book; Ralph isn't listed, and he's not eager to give out his address because that waiting list is about as long as his small operation can handle. The long and short of it is that besides reading this article, there is only one other way in the world that you will ever hear about Ralph: by word of mouth.

"How do people find out about Ralph's wigs?" he asks rhetorically. "Plastic surgeons, oncologists, the Orthodox Jewish community and, of course, every



Newsday Photos / Alan Rala

Wigmaker Raffaele — "Everybody knows me as Ralph" — Mollica, left, weaves his magic in his Long Island City studio. Ralph, who considers himself an artist, imports human hair from all over the world, above, to make his wigs.

soon), high society (Doris Duke; he won't name private clients who are living) and Hollywood (it was he who gave Louise Lasser's "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" her brash brown braids), some two decades ago he struck out on his own and he confined his work to medical patients such as cancer sufferers who have lost their hair because of radiation or chemotherapy treatments and Orthodox Jewish women who, following Jewish law, cover their heads with wigs after they marry to ensure their modesty.

While he and his wife, Rosalie, create the wigs in the Long Island City studio and supervise another lab in Italy, his brother, Russ, runs the hairdressing lab on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where the finished products are sold.

Ralph's wigs, which cost \$3,000 to \$5,000, are in

hairdresser on Madison Avenue knows me."

Ralph, who has lived in Long Island City since his family came to New York from Sicily when he was 10, says it was always his dream to live the life of an artist and buy a piece of property that was close to Manhattan.

His turn-of-the-century studio, which he has renovated himself and which he chose because it is so close to Manhattan that on a clear day he can reach out and all but ring the doorbell at Gracie Mansion, is the inspiration for his creations and for his creativity.

"This is my spot," he says as he looks out the studio's third-floor window and watches a sailboat on the East River. "When I come up here to work, I don't want to leave. Our place in the city is magnificent. But nothing compares to this."