



Georgian & Regency Combs & Hair Accessories

1800 – 1840

In this guide I describe the development of ornamental combs and similar hair accessories from their beginnings in the late 18th century to the late 1830s. In British history this coincides with the periods known as late Georgian and Regency. This account draws upon sources by Norma Hague (1985) and Jen Cruse (2007) both of which are cited in the reading list at the bottom.

Background and Social Change

A number of important historical events served to influence the development of jewellery and personal ornaments in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

In her 1985 account of hair accessories Norma Hague describes (p10) how the movement which we now call the Industrial Revolution brought about the rise of a prosperous new middle class. While these newly rich did not possess the fine collections of precious jewellery which had been passed down in aristocratic households, they still wished to wear attractive personal ornaments.

This impetus brought about a demand for jewellery in so-called secondary materials which gave the effect of precious metals. Therefore glittery materials such as pastes and cut steel imitated the flash of diamonds and other costly gemstones. Gold was emulated by gilded brass and pinchbeck, an alloy of copper and zinc which does not tarnish. Such secondary materials were made with as much skill and craftsmanship as their more precious counterparts into personal ornaments, including hair accessories. They cost a fraction of ornaments in precious metals and gemstones, but fulfilled their purpose of allowing the middle classes to have stylish and fashionable accessories. Being made of intrinsically low value materials, these ornaments were not broken up and re-modelled when the fashions changed, as were precious jewels. Consequently many of them have survived intact to this day.

Another factor which influenced jewellery design in Europe was the French Revolution. When the ordinary people of France turned against the monarchy and aristocracy, anything having connotations of wealth and splendour became positively dangerous to wear. Expensive jewellery fell out of fashion. So family jewels were laid-away and very little personal adornment was worn during these years. When the monarchy was re-established in France by Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 19th century fashions had changed completely. The new monarch wished to establish for his court what we today would call a *fashion look* which owed nothing to the regime that had gone before it.

The stylish empress Josephine and the ladies of her court favoured the classical modes of ancient Greece and Rome. In this style, the gown was a simple sheath, with the waistline placed immediately beneath the breast. These gowns, with their low necks, concentrated the onlooker's attention upon the head and shoulders. Therefore ornaments for the neck, ears and hair became particularly important. As a result whole suites of matching jewellery were produced, and no such suite was complete without a high decorative comb and tiara like ornament.



Picture 1: Princess Pauline Bonaparte wearing a suite of cameos and diamonds with a high comb

Illustration 1 is a portrait of Princess Pauline Bonaparte, sister of Emperor Napoleon. She was one of the most fashionable and celebrated women of her day and greatly imitated. She is wearing her hair in a pseudo-Grecian style influenced by classical antiquity, with small curls on the forehead and the rest swept up into a high chignon.

Princess Pauline is wearing one of the fashionable matching suites of jewellery which consists of earrings, a high tiara comb and a bandeau like ornament called a *tour de tete*. All these ornaments are part of a matching set and comprise classical cameos set in diamonds. Of all the gemstones associated with the court of Napoleon and the jewellery of this period cameos are most typical because of their associations with classical Greece and Rome.

The Development of Ornamental hair combs

Combs for dressing and cleaning the hair have been used since antiquity. However the evolution of hair combs to be used solely for decorative purposes appears to have developed in the last quarter of the 18th century.

The hairstyles of the period 1760-1790s were extremely voluminous, requiring several hours work on the part of the coiffeur. Pictures have come down to us of fantastical coiffures adorned with ships at sea, complete with sailors, and entire landscapes with houses and farm animals! These vast erections were padded out with huge amounts of false hair and kept in place by grease or pomade.

Such complex dressings could only be assembled in stages. Contemporary descriptions of hairdressing in the last quarter of the 18th century show that it was usual to use small combs for holding back portions of the hair while other parts were being worked on. In her scholarly account of the development of ornamental combs, Jen Cruse (see reading list) speculates that the decorative hair comb as we know it today probably developed from these small plain implements used for dressing the hair.

These early decorative hair combs were at first fairly simple affairs compared to their later descendants in the mid Victorian era. They were very flat in construction and were made from such materials as silver, brass and steel. At first the ornamental top or heading of the comb was of fairly modest proportions and usually decorated with lacy filigree wire work or pierced work of delicate proportions. As time went on, other materials such as ivory, horn and the favourite tortoiseshell were added to the decorative repertoire of jewellers who began to specialise in making these combs.



Picture 2: Silver gilt filigree hair comb dating from the early 19th century

The high piled Grecian inspired hairstyles favoured a small chignon, into which a comb was often thrust so as to be visible from all angles. In tune with the popular taste for pale delicate colours and high waists, the hair combs of the early 19th century were usually light and delicate in appearance. Picture 2 shows a typical ornament of this period made in silver gilt filigree. The delicate lacy design is based upon open scrollwork. The heading of the comb is surmounted by a series of hollow balls made from openwork filigree, and further embellished with the small metal dots called granulation.



Picture 3: Horn, silver gilt and faux pearl hair comb from the early 19th century

Picture 3 is another fine early example of a decorative hair comb, this time in horn with added embellishments. Notice here how long the horn prongs are, and how small and simple the heading decoration is in contrast. This probably means that the comb is of British rather than French origin. England was at war with France during this period, and so French styles were slower to catch on with the British fashionable elite. The heading has a gilded metal back plate overlaid by a delicate scroll like filigree design. The design has an attractive scalloped profile and is further embellished by a square cut topaz (faux) flanked by two spherical artificial pearls.

Tiaras and Frontlets

Another form of hair comb which appeared at this period was what we now call a tiara comb. This is an ornament in which the teeth or prongs are set at a 90 degree angle to the decorative heading. When the object is worn the backwards projecting teeth are concealed beneath the front hair, and the upstanding front piece gives the appearance of a tiara proper.

In France, where most of these decorative tiara combs were produced, it was possible to purchase matching sets. In her book (see below) Jen Cruse describes these as *frontlets*, and explains how they were used. The ornamental headings were secured to a detachable set of

teeth by a small clip or screw fitting at either end or in the centre. A suite might therefore contain a set of plain brass teeth, and two or three *frontlets* in different materials which could be changed to suit the occasion. This meant that a lady of modest means could give the fashionable impression of owning many different headdresses.



Picture 4: A set consisting of comb mount with a detachable *frontlet*

Picture 4 shows a gilt brass frontlet decorated with faux opals. The comb mount is already attached to the set of teeth. The owner of this particular hair comb may well have been provided with an entire wardrobe of ornaments which she could vary to suit the occasion. In France such a suite was usually part of the *corbeille de mariage* (wedding gift) of jewellery that was traditionally given by a husband-to-be to his betrothed.

Faux pearls, coral and various coloured semi precious gemstones or pastes were the favourite modes of decoration. The *frontlets* were made in a fairly limited range of openwork patterns, such as florals, feathers, scrollwork or clusters of grapes, with the decorative stones placed to accentuate the design. Other classic type designs such as the Greek key or fret pattern and laurel wreath designs were also popular Hague p. 14). These *frontlets* were usually finished off along the top edge with a series of upstanding pins, each of which accommodated a faceted bead or jewel.



Picture 5: Early 19th century tiara comb with faceted coral and bead decoration

Picture 5 shows one of these fine early 19th century tiara combs which is heavily decorated with coral beads. Coral is one of the favourite semi-precious materials used throughout the 19th century and was considered particularly suitable for young girls. This tiara comb is decorated with a row of very small beads, which are threaded upon fine gilt wired. Set above is a pierced gallery which contains pear shaped faceted corals, each of which is set in an ornate mount.

High Hairdressing and Spanish Mantilla Combs

By the late 1820s the fashionable hairdressing and the accessories being used to adorn it had grown extremely complex. Great stiffened loops of hair, known as Apollo knots, and usually false, were placed on the crown to give height to the dressing. Other accessories such as feathers and long hairpins were added to the pile.

Picture 6 is a hand coloured illustration from the year 1832 and is taken from a modish journal called *The World of Fashion*. The two fashionable ladies have these exceedingly elaborate coiffures which must have taken many hours to arrange. However, in all probability, the

various components are made from false hair, which were attached to small plain combs. Needless to say, only ladies with a great deal of leisure could afford to have such eccentric coiffures!

Notice that the favourite ornament, known as the Spanish mantilla comb, is worn to support these extremely high coiffures. Both ladies have high Spanish style combs which appear to be beautifully pierced into complex designs.



Picture 6: Engraved fashion plate from the World of Fashion 1832 showing high mantilla style hair combs

The name Spanish mantilla combs is often used as a kind of umbrella term for any decorative hair comb that has a high upstanding cresting that rises up proud from the top of the head when the comb is placed in position. However, the Spanish mantilla comb or *Peinita*, to give it the proper name, is really part of the beautiful and traditional native dress which is worn in certain parts of Spain, notably Andalusia, on festive occasions. You can read more about the history and development of these beautiful ornaments in my guide on Spanish mantilla combs.

By the 1830s the high *Peinita* or Spanish style comb was being worn not only in its native Spain but also throughout Europe. These high combs were also used in the USA, whence they had spread from Spanish speaking countries like Mexico or been imported by ladies of Spanish descent. The mantilla combs were made in various materials such as metal, horn and tortoiseshell. The latter was the favourite material. The so called blonde variety, which is the colour of dark honey, was favoured above all others.

In some of these combs the heading might be as much as eight or ten inches in height, so that its decoration might be visible from all angles. Pierced openwork patterns were often of such delicacy that they resembled lace, like the example in picture 7.

The next few pictures show a selection of high Spanish style combs from this period which have passed through my store over the last two years.



Picture 7: Early 19th century mantilla comb in blonde tortoiseshell

Picture 7 shows a Peinita in the favourite blonde tortoiseshell which measures 9 inches high by 6 inches wide. This one has a beautiful lacy openwork design and is entirely hand cut.

Picture 8 shows another tortoiseshell comb, but this one is solid without the openwork carving. The chief beauty of this comb is the unusual fluted design, which is like the petals of a flower. Notice too the attractive random mottling of light orange and yellow spots upon a dark ground which is one of the most beautiful features of natural tortoiseshell.



Picture 8: Early 19th century mantilla style comb in dark mottled tortoiseshell

Genuine tortoiseshell has nothing to do with land tortoises but is obtained from the shells of marine turtles, notably the shell of the Hawksbill Turtle. I shall not describe the incredible cruelty with which the turtles were deprived of their shells at the height of this cruel trade. Thankfully this creature is now a protected species and the place of genuine shell has been taken by more environmentally friendly synthetics.

The beautiful honey coloured comb in picture 7 is taken from the breast plate or plastron of the turtle, which produced semi transparent material that is often called blonde for its colour. Less expensive, but just as beautiful, the mottled variety was derived from the back plates of the shell.



Picture 9: Early 19th century hair comb in clarified and pierced horn

Horn was also used, although it was considerably cheaper than tortoiseshell. Most horn combs were therefore treated with chemicals to simulate the surface markings of the more expensive material. This was often very cunningly done, so that it is difficult for inexperienced collectors and dealers to determine which is genuine.

Picture 9 shows a lovely horn Spanish style hair comb which has been clarified to render it semi transparent. This was another favourite treatment for horn combs, and leaves them the colour of pale honey or amber. This one has a cut out border with a delicately fretted panel of

flowers and leaves. It has also been etched with a pretty floral design on the central panel, which only shows when the ornament is held up against the light as in this picture.



Picture 10: Gilt metal hair comb of lace like delicacy, circa 1820-30s

Perhaps more environmentally friendly is the beautiful silver gilt filigree *Peinita* illustrated in picture 10. This ornament is somewhat later, and the degree of elaboration of the metal work shows that it dates from well into the 19th century. The effect of the filigree work is reminiscent of gold lace, and it must have appeared very beautiful with a lace veil draped over it.

The effect of fashionable ladies wearing these giant combs caused a great deal of mockery in the popular newspapers of the day. There were cartoons where the combs are represented as being so large that they blocked the streets, stopped the traffic, and even caused injury to other pedestrians! The result of all this public mockery is that by the mid 1830s the high complex hairstyles and the great *Peinetas* which had helped to sustain them fell completely out of fashion in non-Spanish countries.

By the time Queen Victoria ascended the British throne the high elaborate coiffures has subsided in favour of a flat dropped dressing, with a small chignon and bunches of romantic ringlets at the sides. This Early Victorian period was, indeed, known as the Romantic. However an account of the hair combs and other accessories favoured must wait until another guide.

Further Reading

For those who would like to do some wider reading on the fascinating subject of comb collecting, the following books are strongly recommended:

Jen CRUSE, *The Comb, its development and history*. Robert Hale, 2007.

This is the first major book in English to deal in depth with combs and hairpins around the world. Having well over 500 colour and black and white illustrations the text surveys the subject from ancient cultures to the mid 20th century. The development of the combmaker's craft is recounted up to and including the development of plastics. The book illustrates the use of combs as articles of grooming and dressing as well as for ornamental use. An in depth and essential reference book for both collectors and scholars.

Mary BACHMAN, *Collectors Guide to Hair Combs*, Collector Books, 1998.

This wonderful little book is an invaluable source of information on the huge range of Art Deco combs which were produced in the USA. Although the text is not extensive it is well arranged in logical sections according to materials and styles. The work is packed with delightful colour pictures of the author's own amazing collection. There are also 19th century and ethnic examples but the concentration is definitely upon the vast range of designs which are found in celluloid and other synthetic hair combs of the early 20th century.

Norma HAGUE, *Combs and Hair Accessories*. Antique Pocket Guides. Pub. in the USA by Seven Hills Books, Cincinnati.

This little book complements Bachman because it concentrates on British and European examples, and covers the period 1780 to the 1950s. This too is illustrated with the author's own collection. It is a pity that the pictures are monochrome. However, the great strength of this work is the scholarliness and comprehensiveness of its text. The author has placed hair accessories in their social and historical context, and includes much valuable and fascinating information about the art movements and other events which influenced fashion. The text is arranged chronologically, making it easy to use.

Together these two small books constitute the two 'bibles' of hair comb collecting.

A third book which is of interest from an illustrative point of view is **Evelyn HAERTIG**, *Antique Combs and Purses*. Carmel, California, Gallery Graphics Press.

This is a large and expensive 'coffee table' book, with many sumptuous illustrations in both mono and colour. Unfortunately it is let down by the poor quality of the text. This is messy and fragmented, and unlike the two works above appears to follow no logical plan in its organization and is difficult to use.