



Hair Combs of the Art Deco Period

Part 1 (Transition)

Origins and Influences of Art Deco

This series of guides will deal with decorative hair combs of the Art Deco period which spans the years from approximately 1910 to 1940.

These ornaments are some of the most spectacular and beautiful that collectors will come across. They range from huge lacy mantilla style combs, which were popular early in the period, to the pretty little rhinestone comb clips and barrettes of the late 1930s. These latter are still very wearable with today's fashions for smart dressy occasions such as proms and parties.

This first guide traces the origins of the Art Deco style and its evolution from the previous design movement, known as *Art Nouveau*.

How Art Deco Got Its Name

An essentially decorative style of the years following the First World War, Art Deco reached its peak in 1925 at the *Exposition des Art Decoratifs et Industrielles Modernes* in Paris, from which the name is derived.

In popular imagination, Art Deco belongs to a world of luxury and decadence, the golden age of the 1920s and 1930s. The very term conjures up a multitude of romantic images; huge ocean liners gliding effortlessly across moonlit seas and the sound of clinking cocktail glasses. Yet despite this emphasis on luxury, Art Deco emerged in an era of economic slumps, industrial depressions and social strife. It was against this troubled and traumatic background that Art Deco evolved.

Art Deco was essentially an eclectic style. A diversity of historic and cultural sources contributed to its unique identity. It also employed the latest industrial materials and techniques combined with new materials. It was this fusion of luxury and modernity that gave Art Deco its unique character. Ultimately it was a style of fantasy, as escapist as any of the Hollywood musicals of the 1930s which were so influential in its development in the USA. Its legacy, however, is one of great beauty, craft and imagination in some of the most spectacular artefacts of adornment that have come down to us from that era.

The Transitional Years

The years 1900-20 were a period of transitional between two major stylistic movements; Art Nouveau and Art Deco. Art Nouveau lasted from approximately 1895 to 1910. It began in the late 19th century as a reaction against the great quantities of jewellery and personal items which were being stamped out by machine. Early Art Nouveau jewellery and hair ornaments were hand made by artist-craftspeople. However as the taste for these designs percolated down the social strata a range of mass produced ornaments appeared. These were manufactured in celluloid and other synthetics, although many of these were hand finished and tinted.

As a design genre, Art Nouveau is characterised by the use of various naturalistic motifs, such as flora and fauna, or by free flowing lines and organic shapes, often combined into an asymmetric design. Art Deco borrowed extensively from Art Nouveau in its highly stylised and graceful motifs. However, Art Deco took the free-flowing curves and naturalistic motifs and replaced them with more geometric and symmetrical themes which began to emerge about 1910. We find then the existence of a so called transitional style where the curvilinear designs of Art Nouveau and often combined with more geometric and formalised motifs. Some of the most beautiful and sympathetic treatments of the transitional style appear in combs, hairpins and barrettes of this period.



Picture 1: Hand tinted transitional design with fruits

Art Nouveau and Nature

We can see this fusion of styles in Picture 1 which is a very beautiful example in the material known as French ivory or Ivorene. This was introduced as a substitute for genuine elephant ivory which was becoming rare and expensive. This lovely hair comb has a wedge shaped heading in which two openwork panels feature fruits and leaves. Despite being essentially machine made, the elements have then been hand carved and tinted. In this transitional ornament naturalism in the representation of flowers and leaves is replaced by stylisation and formalism. Although elements like interlaced lines and natural elements persist there is a stiffness and artificiality about the form of the general design which is leading inexorably towards the formalised geometry of Art Deco.



Picture 2: French ivory hair comb this featuring the theme of mistletoe

This very beautiful transitional comb, although pressed out by machinery, shows elements of hand finishing. It is translucent and when held up to the light shows a beautiful shade of teal green, combined with touches of brown and orange.



Picture 3: Featuring oak leaves

Once again we can see how techniques of hand finishing and embellishment have contributed to the effect of this lovely comb. This one employs a technique called *pique*, whereby small dots of gold tone metal are fused by heat into the surface of the material. *Pique*, or to give it its full name, *pique d'or*, is a traditional technique for decoration of Victorian tortoiseshell hair combs and small vanity items. However, after the use of genuine shell had given place to faux tortoiseshell celluloid, the technique continued to be employed in the early 20th century.



Picture 4: Handsome 'flora and fauna' comb, depicting the clover plant

The peacock was a design motif much beloved of Art Nouveau designers, along with other winged creatures such as swallows, butterflies and dragonflies. Turning now from plants and flowers to more animated life forms, we find these used to great effect in comb designs of the transitional period. An interesting example is shown in picture 5.



Picture 5: Black celluloid comb with butterflies

This is a mass produced ornament without any degree of hand finishing. Still we can see how charming the effect of the distinctive butterfly shapes is when the comb is held up to the light. It is possible that being of unadorned black this comb was used for mourning. However it was more likely simply a pretty and fashionable accessory.

Picture 6 is certainly in a class on its own. A very elaborate transitional style hair comb, and one of the most beautiful I have ever sold on eBay. It is made from celluloid faux tortoiseshell as a base material. The fan shaped heading takes the form of a peacock's tail, and is embellished with gilding and various colours in metallic paints of glorious hue.



Picture 6: Transitional design resembling peacock's tail

The myriad of wonderful colours found in the plumage of real live peacocks when they are displaying their tails for mating purposes proved to be a wonderful inspiration to the designers of Art Nouveau jewellery and personal ornaments.

One of the most interesting metals to be employed at this time was aluminum (known as aluminium in the UK). The general introduction of electricity for lighting public buildings in the early 20th century is credited with popularising the almost exclusive use of diamonds set into platinum in primary jewellery. Ornaments for those with slimmer purses followed suit by losing their colour. In this class of jewellery platinum and white gold were replaced with silver tone metal and aluminum, and were set with rhinestones. These pretty aluminum hair combs with a combination of curvilinear and geometric motifs are quite plentiful. However the one shown in picture 7, which is a large hair comb made entirely of aluminum with no sets or surface decoration other than its attractive openwork pattern is unusual.



Picture 7: Large aluminum hair comb

The final comb illustration in this section on transitional design hair ornaments is a very large and spectacular one. This one measures fully eight inches from the tip of the tines to the top of the heading, and is designed to be seen from all angles! We can see that the openwork design, which is a combination of geometric and curvilinear elements is a truly transitional one between these two great art movements of Nouveau and Deco.



Picture 8: Multi coloured French ivory transitional

How such ornaments were used and worn

No account of these beautiful and spectacular ornaments would be complete without an appreciation of how they were worn. These large hair combs were worn in a very distinctive way, as we can see in the final two illustrations. The first (9) is taken from an advertisement for hair combs in a British fashion and society magazine called *The Queen*.

Our final illustration is from the front cover of *Vogue* for 1923. The comb worn by the sitter is so large and spectacular that it resembles the mantilla combs or peinita used by Spanish ladies with their traditional costumes.

Such magazines kept people abreast with the latest styles in jewellery and ornaments, and also provided information on how these should be worn. There were also specialist magazines for the hairdressing profession, just as today. The 'Hairdressers Journal' for June 1923 declared:

'Combs, jewelled, carved or plain, in many varieties of tortoiseshell, coral are carried out in all of the fashionable colourings. Many of these combs are really enormous and create a most becoming background. Most fashionable women wear them to one side and thus employed they are certainly chic, if a little difficult to carry off.'



Picture 9: fashion engraving from *The Queen* 1923

We can see in Pictures 9 and 10 how the large and elaborate comb is thrust into the model's low coiffure in such a way that it can be seen from all sides. Often these combs were worn at an angle, giving a very distinctive look. This permitted the beautiful design of the heading to be effectively outlined against the light when the wearer stood.



Picture 10: *Vogue* magazine cover 1923

As the last elements of Art Nouveau were gradually transmuted into the angularity of Art Deco from about 1910 onwards, the style matured and changed. Many other design movements, such as [Orientalism](#), Cubism and Modernism influenced the development of Art Deco. All these elements can be seen in the design of hair combs. However, these must necessarily be the subject of further guides in this series.

Further reading:

For those who would like to do some 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.

A 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.