



Hair Combs of the Art Deco Period Part 5 (Moderne)

Changing Fashions in Hair

As the end of the 1920s decade advanced, fashions invariably changed. Many women had adopted the short haircut known as the bob, or the even shorter boyish crop called the shingle. In these brief coiffures there was no place for giant hair combs, which needed a chignon to anchor them. Hair ornaments did not disappear, for not all women wore their hair short. However they developed a very different character from that of the preceding years.

Art deco quickly gained hold in the United States, where it reached the height of its achievement in architecture. This was especially the case in New York City's soaring skyscrapers of the late 1920s and early 1930s such as the Chrysler, Daily News, and Empire State buildings.

As the 1930s progressed, American Art Deco became increasingly identified with the imagery of technology and speed. It emphasized the use of modern glossy materials, smooth seamless surfaces, and aerodynamic horizontal lines. This sleeker version of art deco, known as Art Moderne or Streamlined Moderne, supplanted the detailed geometrics, jazzy patterns and bright colours of early Art Deco.

Art Moderne or Late Art Deco

Art Moderne design was highlighted at the 1933 Chicago World Fair. Many products produced during the 1930s, from architecture to jewellery, expressed the new Art Moderne ideals of excitement over technological advancements, high speed transportation, and innovative new construction techniques. However, the Art Moderne period (1935-1945) avoided frivolous swirls and bright colours. Instead it emphasized forms that were streamlined into crisp geometric lines. Designs lost their purely decorative appearance, and became simpler and almost utilitarian in their conception.

Picture 1 shows an advertisement for the combs of the high end French Maison Auguste Bonaz from an English magazine of the period. The Bonaz *atelier* was one of the foremost producers of elegant hair combs of the early Art Deco period, and its work continued into the next decade. We can see that the example in the illustration and the one worn by the sitter are very small and simple, and in marked contrast with the huge combs produced by the workshop in the period 1910-25.



Picture 1: Advertisement for Auguste Bonaz showing small side hair combs

Illustration 2 shows two little side combs which exemplify this new streamlined style. They are similar in their crisp triangular profile to the one worn by the model in the Bonaz poster. In their simple asymmetric triangular shape they reflect the influence of popular art movements such as Cubism, Modernism and Futurism, which stress the idea of streamlined speed, smooth materials, and abstract, geometric forms.

With its stripped-down forms and geometric-based ornamentation, the late Art Moderne style appears rather sleek and lacking in ornamentation, whereas the earlier Deco style of the 1920s can be quite showy. These are excellent examples of celluloid side-combs sold in high end stores and hairdressers during the late 1920s or 1930s. Although these ornaments retain some surface decoration in the form of applied gilding and pierced work, their shape is almost aerodynamic. Here we have exciting modernist costume ornaments, using a simple abstract form, with only minimal surface ornamentation.



Picture 2: Small side combs early 1930s

By this time, the emphasis in a precious jewelled ornament had moved from the settings to a concentration upon the stones themselves. New ways of cutting gemstones were also perfected, and the favourite form of primary jewellery of the 1930s was diamonds set in platinum or white gold. The jewellery of the 1930s is chiefly characterised by its geometric design and its lack of colour. Whereas the jewellery and personal ornaments of the 1920s were quite colourful, those of the 1930s were almost monochrome. Diamonds were the usual all white glittering effect, sometimes combined with black or coloured enamel for relief.

These trends are also echoed in ornaments for the more budget-conscious woman, which were made in gold or silver tone metal and set with rhinestones. Another metal used in budget jewellery was aluminum, whose silvery appearance suited the all white look.

Another advertisement for the Bonaz workshop, this time from a French magazine and dating to the late 1930s reflects this trend (illustration 3).



Picture 3: Advertisement for rhinestone hair accessories, Auguste Bonaz early 1930s

We can see that the three models are wearing small rhinestone hair ornaments in the form of tiaras, combs and barrettes, formed as stars. Throughout the 1930s small rhinestone hair ornaments like these were in vogue to adorn the somewhat sculptural hairstyles. In picture 4

the mannequin wears a barrette of chromed metal formed with three rhinestone stars in graduated sizes. The form and design is very similar to that in the Bonaz poster.



Picture 4: Star shaped rhinestone barrette, 1930s

Throughout the 1930s small rhinestone hair ornaments remained in vogue to adorn evening hairstyles. The favourite motifs were stars, circles, rectangles and stepped geometric forms, like those in picture 5. These hair ornaments are barrettes with rhinestones that are claw set into gold tone or chromed metal mounts. Their severe geometric design in the form of a stepped rectangle, buckle shape or simple bar, is typical of the period.



Picture 5: Geometric rhinestone hair ornaments, 1930s

A typical hair comb of the period is seen in illustration 6. This versatile little ornament is fitted with a spring clip which allows it to be used in a number of ways. Besides a hair ornament it could also be clipped to the neckline of a dress or sweater, or pinned upon a lapel. These small ornaments were usually made as matched pairs or in sets of four. A fashionable lady would wear two in her hair and the matching pair at the neckline of a plain dress. The classic ornament of the 1930s is the paired dress clip of this type, sometimes called a fur clip.



Picture 6: Art Moderne chromed metal and rhinestone clip-comb, 1930s

This is a perfect example of the costume jewellery of the period, with sparkling rhinestones set into chromed metal. It is interesting to see that in this one small modest ornament, rhinestones of three different shapes and sizes (circular, rectangular and pear shaped) are all used in combination to achieve the effect. This again is in imitation of precious jewellery, where the favourite ways of cutting diamonds were now into rectangles, squares or even more exciting geometric shapes. The long thin rectangles used in this clip are known as *baguettes*.

The Decline of Strict Geometric Forms

The late Art Deco or Art Moderne style remained influential well into the 1940s. Eventually it too gave way to a new manifestation, which has come down to us by the name of Art Moderne Baroque or neo- Baroque.

From the later 1930s we find that the severe angular lines of pure Moderne are becoming compromised by more curved, naturalistic forms, and an emerging taste for more colour and elaboration in dress and personal adornment. Towards the end of the 1930s we find curved styles gradually creeping back into jewellery and hair ornaments. At first this trend was a fairly modest one, and the small side comb in picture 7 is typical ornaments of the late 1930s and early 1940s.



Picture 7: Small metal side comb, late 1930s or 1940s

This pretty ornament is made entirely of gilt metal and measures a modest 2 x 2 inches. The whimsical design represents a spray of wing-like leaves, with a large prong set rhinestone placed in the centre. This little comb is one of a pair, and these modest ornaments known as side combs or tucks combs, would be reserved purely for evening occasions.

In the late 1930s and into the 1940s the taste for more colour and variety in jewellery and personal ornaments increased. Gradually, there evolved the style which we now call *Baroque Moderne* or *neo Baroque*.

The Baroque was originally an important art movement of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. It was characterised by rich and elaborate decoration which is often asymmetric in character, heavy scrollwork, and a great deal of opulent gilding. In costume jewellery terms, Baroque or neo- Baroque is a design language of luxury and opulence which uses a rich palette of golds, faux pearls and coloured stones to contrast with glittering rhinestones and ornate settings.



Picture 8: Rhinestone encrusted side comb, late 1930s or early 1940s

The beautiful faux tortoiseshell and rhinestone side comb in picture 8 is an excellent example of this more elaborate and curvaceous style of hair ornament which was still predominantly colourless. This pretty ornament has a heading designed as an elaborate series of loops closely encrusted with glittering rhinestones which are prong set into silver tone metal.

The Effect of World War II

With the advent of World War II, fashion as we understand the word, went into a kind of limbo in Europe. Paris came under enemy occupation, and consequently the production of fine jewellery and *haute couture* ceased. Even when peace returned, raw materials were in short supply and austerity was the order of the day. This meant that clothing was strictly rationed for a number of years, and the production of luxury goods curtailed. For these reasons, Paris lost its pre-eminence as the primary source of innovative costume jewellery.

With newly developed techniques of mass-production, America now took over from Paris as the leading exponent of stylish and innovative costume jewellery for the wider market. The impetus behind much of this design was supplied by Hollywood and the great film divas of that era. This vogue for more colourful and elaborate jewellery forms was led from the USA, where some of the most beautiful neo Baroque style costume jewellery was produced.



Picture 9: American edition of Vogue 1939 showing elaborate neo-Baroque hair accessory

Picture 9 is an ad dated 1939 and is taken from American Vogue. The model has her hair swept into a glamorous updo which became high fashion in the late 1930s and early 1940s. She is wearing a wonderfully elaborate hair ornament which is the very essence of the neo-Baroque taste.

The Rise of Neo-Baroque Forms

After the war the influence *haute couture* returned. Paris continued to exert some influence upon primary and fine jewellery design for those for whom expense was no object. After many

years of austerity, women were longing for a more feminine look. In 1949 Christian Dior introduced his New Look, which was a much more luxurious and graceful female silhouette. These glamorous new fashions cried out for beautiful jewellery to complement them. Thus the story of hair accessories in the late 1940s and early 1950s sees the growth and development of hair ornaments and jewellery in the florid neo Baroque style.



Picture 10: Rhinestone hair comb in the neo-Baroque style, mid to late 1950s

Picture 10 is a very beautiful hair comb which dates from the mid to late 1950s. We know this because the large centre stone is an AB or Aurora Borealis rhinestone. These beautiful stones were not widely available from Austria until the mid 1950s, and their production had been yet another casualty of World War II.

This very handsome ornament takes the form of an elaborate flower spray which is mounted upon a comb with split prongs of clear Lucite. It was probably originally one of a pair, designed to adorn the sides of a glamorous updo for the most formal of occasions. The asymmetric floral design is typical of the period.

This lovely comb now brings us into the 1950s, and therefore to the end of this particular account. The story of hair accessories in the 1950s and 1960s, generally known as Retro ornaments, will have to be the subject of another guide.

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.