



Japanese Kanzashi Hair Combs & Accessories

A Little History of Japanese Hair Adornment

Some 400 years ago, Japan took the simple hair comb and transformed it into an elegant beauty accessory that became a work of art. Japanese *kushi* (combs) and *Kanzashi* (hairpins) became expressions of a woman's character, social class and marital status. Until the beginning of the modern era, decorative combs and hairpins, known by the collective name of *Kanzashi*, have been an important part of Japanese fashion and social culture.

Western style jewellery such as rings, necklaces and bracelets was not worn in Japan until the modern era. Instead, women decorated their hair. The elaborate hairstyles (*mage*), of the Edo (1600 – 1868) period required a tremendous amount of time and money to maintain. Indeed the value of what a woman wore in her hair often far exceeded even the cost of the beautiful silken and embroidered kimono she wore on her back.

Hair was so important that it came to symbolize nearly every facet of her existence. Looking at a woman's hairstyle, you could tell what social class she belonged to, whether she was married or single, her age, and whether she had any children. In this way hair ornaments played an important role in the female wardrobe. Hair accessories were often given as gifts.

Until the late 19th century Japan had remained isolated from European influences. However the opening of Japan to the West in 1868 created a new stimulus for Japanese artists. The influence of characteristics of Western art and the demands of the Western market both played a significant part in the re-interpretation of traditional aesthetics values. Therefore traditional forms and techniques were given new guise in the creation of items more suited to the customers of the Western market.

Hairdressing

Kanzashi first appeared during the Edo period, when women adopted the elaborately coiffured *nihongami* hairstyles. Early hairstyles consisted of elaborate forepart, side locks and back hair, dressed separately. It took hours for a female hairdresser to set the hair into the elaborate traditional *nihongami* hairstyle. So to keep the arrangement as long as possible the wearer would use as a pillow a small lacquered or wooden stand topped by a soft pad which fitted under the neck without disarranging the coiffure.



Picture 1: Elaborate traditional hairdressing with many ornaments including combs (*kushi*) hair stick (*kogai*) and *Kanzashi*

Picture one shows one of these elaborate hairstyles. It can be seen that many different kinds of ornaments are worn together. For hundreds of years the Japanese have illustrated their hair decoration in numerous woodcuts. Generally these ornaments consist of a small semi-circular or rectangular comb (*kushi*) a flat stick-like ornament (*kogai*) and/or elaborate hairpins (*Kanzashi*). There are also elaborate hairpins with dangling ends (*Hana-Kanzashi*).

Sometimes more than one comb or several *kogai* hair sticks were worn together in the traditional coiffure. It was for this reason that artisans and lacquer masters began to produce more finely crafted products.

However from the *Taisho* (1912-26) and *Showa* (1926-89) eras this complex hairstyle became simplified into the *hisashi-gami* or low pompadour. This had a generally rounded form and a doughnut shaped chignon at the back. With these new shapes, and the growing influence of the West, European type combs became fashionable. They were stuck into the chignon at all angles in order to better display them.

These combs and hairpins were worn in a rather different manner than in the West. They were placed so that not only the top or heading but also part of the long prongs stood out proud from the head. This enabled the beauty of the design to be fully displayed from all angles. Some hairpins, known as *birra-birra*, had long dangling ends or tassels which swung and trembled when the wearer walked. Of course these needed to stand out from the head in order to avoid becoming entangled with the hair.

Overview of Kanzashi Types

Kanzashi are made from a very wide range of materials, including lacquered wood, carved ivory, tortoiseshell and horn, pierced and gilded metal, and more lately synthetics such as celluloid, bakelite and acrylics. There are also many different ways of wearing them. The way in which a geisha wears her Kanzashi indicates her status immediately to an informed audience. For example *maiko* (apprentice geisha) usually wear more numerous and elaborate Kanzashi than older geisha, and progress through several hairstyles where the Kanzashi must be worn in a fixed pattern.

The word *Kanzashi* itself is also something of a misnomer. Nowadays it is loosely used as an umbrella term to cover all kinds of Japanese hair accessories. However there are a number of distinctive types.

Basic Kanzashi

The simplest form of Kanzashi has long prongs, either single or double, and a small heading with some kind of decorative treatment. The most characteristic types have heads shaped as balls or flat metal disks, similar to that in picture 2.



Picture 2: Simple kanzashi hair ornament in gilt metal openwork with a pattern of chrysanthemums

This ornament is made of gilt metal, usually brass or bronze. It has openwork heading which is decorated with a very Western looking basket of chrysanthemums.

Japanese arts and crafts have traditionally drawn on nature; cherry, plum, maple, pine, chrysanthemum and others are themes running throughout Japanese art. The chrysanthemum, as well as being the national flower of Japan, is also the personal emblem of

the royal family who enjoy great respect. It implies longevity, ease and serenity amidst splendour, good cheer and spirits.

Also decorating the heading of this comb we see two examples of the *mons* or family crest of the owner. These crests are frequently seen embroidered upon garments.

The back of the heading in hairpins like this is usually decorated as well, but in a somewhat simpler manner. Notice the ear-pick shaped projection which finishes off the heading. In earlier periods, regular official edicts prohibiting decadence or the display of luxury were published. These were sidestepped by giving *kanzashi* a scooped end like this, and calling them portable era cleaners or head scratchers. This traditional feature persisted into the *Showa* era.

A much more elaborate type of ornament was the *birra-birra*, also called the Fluttering or Dangling style of *kanzashi*. These hairpins feature rows of metal strips attached by rings to the body of the ornament so that they move independently. Others have long pendants with small metal disks at the end, often nicely engraved. When the wearer is in motion the pendants make a pleasantly tinkling sound, which is sometimes accentuated by additional bells. The name *birra-birra* comes from this sound.



Picture 3: Elaborate *birra-birra* hairpins in lacquer, with gold and coral flowers

Picture 3 illustrates a mannequin wearing a matched pair of these *birra-birra* hair ornaments. In characteristic fashion they are stuck into the front of the hairdressing so that they project on either side of the head with the ornamental pendants dangling. This is a particularly elaborate pair. They have a large heading composed of three overlapping circles of light wood overlaid with bright red lacquer, decorated in gold. They are further embellished with flowers of gold tone sheet metal, each with a coral bead set at the centre. The pendants are composed of fine gold tone chains, each with a small flower shaped disk set at the extremity.

Such richly decorated *kanzashi* are of the type known as *kanoko dome*. These are heavily jewelled accessories crafted with some or all of the following: gold, silver, tortoiseshell, jade, coral, pearls and other semi-precious stones. While the general shape is rounded, they are also found in other shapes, with flowers and butterflies being the most popular.

A *kanzashi* which shows Western influence and probably dating to the early 20th century is shown in picture 4. This beautiful ornament is hand carved from so called blonde tortoiseshell, which comes from the underbelly of the hornbill sea turtle. The artisan has carefully used the natural mottling of this material to enhance the design. This *kanzashi* is really halfway between a hairpin and a comb. It has a fan shaped heading of the type seen in European hair ornaments of this period.

The ornament has an Art Nouveau type styling, which reflects the influence of the West. Art Nouveau was a western design movement which featured naturalistic and highly embellished and intertwined forms. However the influence of Art Nouveau and the later Art Deco moved east, and can be seen in the design of oriental ornaments of the early 20th century onward.

Along with the figural bird, the heading has a flowing organic style which suggests leaves and foliage.



Picture 4: Blonde tortoiseshell Kanzashi hair comb in the European style carved with a peacock motif

However the style of the workmanship, and the theme of the peacock, give this ornament a distinctly Japanese look. In Chinese and Japanese art, the peacock is an enduring symbol of beauty and dignity and the benefactor of mankind. It also represents the attributes of the world, rather than those of the spirit, such as sexuality and vanity. This is because of the magnificent appearance of the male bird when he displays his tail to win a mate.

Hana Kanzashi

In the Japanese language the word *hana* means flower or blossom. This is a special type of hair ornament in the form of a long fluttering flower attached to a comb or pin. It is characteristic of *maiko* or apprentice geisha. These ornaments are created by Japanese artisans from squares of silk by a technique known as *tsunami*. Each square is multiply folded with the aid of pincers and cut into a single petal. These are attached to backings of metal to create whole flowers, or attached to silken threads to create strings of blossom. Butterflies and birds are also common in this art form. Additional detailing of stamens is created by the use of *mizuhiki*, which is a strong thin twine made from *washi* paper, and is often coloured and used for decorative works.

There are also flower-combs called *hanagushi* which are made by gluing folded pieces of silk made in a similar way and attaching them to a wooden base comb rather than a hairpin type attachment.

Geisha wear different hana kanzashi according to the month, or public holiday. In the summer months (June to September), jade ornaments with white or silver themes are worn. During the winter months (October to May), tortoiseshell and coral kanzashi are worn.



Picture 5: Geisha wearing seasonal hana-kanzashi and birra-birra hair ornaments

The seasons dictate which kind of hair ornament is worn in Japan. Usually this applies above all to the geisha and *maiko*, who tend to be the only Japanese women to wear *kanzashi* often enough for seasonal changes to be noticeable. Since *maiko* wear more *kanzashi* than senior geisha, seasonal changes are even more important for them.



Picture 6: *Hana-kanzashi* or flower hair ornaments made from folded fabric

Picture 5 shows two typical *hana kanzashi* worn for the winter season. These beautiful ornaments are in deep red, further embellished with metal *birra-birra* strips, faux pearls and gilt filigree. Further pearls are set at the ends of trembler wires. This theme using deep pink or red *ume* blossoms is considered appropriate for February. These blossoms, which are to be seen everywhere in Japan at this time, symbolises young love and the approach of spring.

Kushi and Kogai

Kushi are hair combs, usually worn in conjunction with long stick like hairpin ornaments called *Kogai*.

Kushi are the traditional ornaments whose classic shapes are round, half moon, rectangular, or rectangular with a rounded back. They can be made in a variety of materials such as horn, tortoiseshell, and lacquered wood or gilded and embellished metal. From the early part of the 20th century *kushi* began to be made from celluloid and bakelite. These synthetic materials, as in the West, carefully imitated the markings of the much more expensive genuine shell, known in Japan as *becco*.

Kushi come in every variety, from the classic unadorned to those which are decorated with various techniques, such as gilding, or abalone and mother of pearl inlay. This latter, known as *radin*, is a favourite style of adornment for these beautiful objects. Picture 7 shows a very beautiful set consisting of a half moon shaped comb, known as a *gen'nai gushi*. It comes in a boxed set with matching *Kogai*. These sets are now considered very collectable, particularly when the box is mint and the ornaments are in very good condition.



Picture 7: Mother of pearl (*radin*) geisha set consisting of hair comb or *kushi* and matching *kogai* hair stick

The basic decorative technique of the comb is that of black lacquer over light weight wood. East Asian lacquer is a resin made from the highly toxic sap of the *rhus verniciflua* tree. Purified lacquer can then be applied to the surface of nearly any object or be built up into a

pile. As high-quality lacquer may require thirty or more coats, its production is time-consuming and extremely costly. Tiny pieces of mother of pearl, and other precious materials such as coral, jade and rock crystal were hand cut into shapes resembling flowers, leaves, and so on. These were inlaid into the lacquer in a kind of mosaic.

The workmanship in this beautiful comb is particularly fine. The design is much formalised, but the motif here appears to represent chrysanthemums, peonies and honeysuckle. In Japanese usage peonies are symbols of wealth and prosperity, and the manifestation of feminine beauty and sexuality when found on textiles celebrating marriage.



Picture 8: Mother of pearl inlay hair comb showing top edge decoration

Picture 8 shows a second view of the same beautifully inlaid comb. Here we can see that the inlay of the design continues over the top and sides of the ornament and thence onto the other side. In contrast hair ornaments made in the West are often plain on the surface that is not seen. Here we must bear in mind the manner in which such ornaments are displayed in the traditional Japanese coiffure. Combs are placed upright into the *mage* or chignon in the *hisashi-gami* type dressing and would there be seen from all angles. So the spine of the comb is often extra wide to allow maximum space for such decorative treatment to be effective. In many combs, particularly those decorated with lacquer, the design extends onto the teeth.

Returning to our discussion of this beautiful mother of pearl set, popularly known as a geisha set in the West; we can see that the comb is accompanied by a *kogai* which is decorated to match. *Kogai*, also called chopstick style hairpins, are specialised stick like ornaments which pull apart either in the middle or at the end so that they may more easily be inserted into the elaborate coiffure. The central part of a *kogai* is hidden in the hair, but both ends appear on either side of the *mage*. So different materials were often used for the centre, while the ends were elaborately decorated with *maki-e* lacquer, carving or, as in this example, mother of pearl inlay (*radin*).

As with the hair comb, whose inlay decoration extends over the top and sides, *kogai* of this quality are typically ornamented upon all surfaces of the end pieces, including the extremities. This is because, as previously mentioned, the manner of placing the ornament renders it visible from all angles when in wear.

In general *kogai* may be made of a similar range of materials to those found in combs: horn, tortoiseshell, lacquer coated wood or metal. The word *kogai* means sword in Japanese. With modern *kogai* this is an appropriate term, because one can say that this fitting resembles a pin and sleeve, like a sword and its sheath. *Kogai* were originally solid sticks around which the hair was wound to form the chignon. However they gradually evolved into their later elaborated form whereby they were simply inserted into the ornate coiffure.



Picture 9: Elaborate *kushi* with lacquer, applied tortoiseshell panels and coral and mother of pearl inlay

Another beautifully decorated *kushi* is shown in picture 9. In this example the main medium used is lacquer, combined with different kinds of inlay. The comb takes a deeply curved profile, and has been coated throughout with bright red lacquer. The surface is then embellished with various elements which give it a three dimensional effect.

Some of these elements are applied pieces of blonde tortoiseshell or *becco* which are carved to resemble formalised flower shapes, with little cabochons of coral set at their hearts. Others are circular pieces of wood which have been superimposed upon one another. These latter are lacquered and then applied with gilded floral designs in gold. The topmost semicircle has a small amount of *radin* mother of pearl inlay. In this example we can see that the trailing gold lacquer decoration even extends across the teeth of this lovely ornament.



Picture 10: Mid 20th century hair comb in overlay technique with polychrome floral decoration

The hair comb in illustration 10 is an example of the type of more modern *kushi* which began to appear in the mid 20th century, and is widely seen today. In these combs, the base material is most likely to be wood coated lacquer or some form of synthetic. We find celluloid and bakelite being used in the earlier examples, while modern Japanese examples in similar shapes are made in Lucite or more recent acrylics.

A typical feature of the basic design is that such combs are often asymmetric, in contrast with the earlier and more traditional *kushi*. This example has a typical asymmetric profile. It is made in a clear synthetic by an interesting technique which is known as celluloid overlay. This is where two different colours are cast one on top of the other, to produce interesting decorative effects. Here a transparent base has been treated with a pale gold coating. Onto this is executed a multi coloured hand painted design of formalised flowers and a butterfly. The comb is then given a transparent top coating which effectively seals the design inside, protecting it from damage.

Japanese Hair Accessories Today

We have seen that in the past combs and hair accessories were essential aspects of Japanese personal decoration.

There are many superstitions regarding the use of combs and hair ornaments. Hair ornaments which took the form of flowers were believed to magically endow a woman with the purity and essence of flowers. Combs were believed to have special ability to protect the wearer from harm. Because they were thought to bring good luck, losing them was an ill omen. If a woman hurled her comb at her husband's feet it indicated she wanted a divorce. A gift of a comb was welcomed when one was undertaking a journey, symbolising the wish that any problems the traveller met could be untangled as easily as the comb straightens the hair.

In modern times, the use of these lovely ornaments fell into disuse, and was reserved for brides and professional kimono wearers such as geisha, maiko or professional entertainers. While these beautiful objects have long been appreciated and collected in the West, many Japanese collectors are now buying up fine and typical examples. Moreover, a wealth of

recent books on the wearing of kimono and hair ornaments aimed at the popular market has spurred a revival among younger Japanese women who are anxious to appreciate their cultural heritage.

Further reading:

There are many contemporary books on Japanese hair dressing and accessories as this subject is experiencing something of a revival. Most are in Japanese but the pictures are often very beautiful and some have captions in English. Most of these books are imported from Japan but some are available in the USA.

Specialist Works on Japanese and Ethnic Combs

Sharon **ZIESNITZ** & Takeguchi **MOMOKO**. *Combs and Hairpins*. Daruma 35; vol 9 no3, Summer 2002; pp13-23

This is a scholarly magazine article in English which contains an excellent history and overview of Japanese hair accessories with some beautiful colour illustrations. I bought my copy on eBay and copies are sometime available from Japanese booksellers who advertise in the Kanzashi section.

BOLLE, Robert. *Le Peigne dans la Monde (combs of the world)* Musee du Peigne et de la Plastique d'Oyonnax.

This beautifully illustrated book features a selection of hair accessories from many lands and periods from the collection of the famous Oyonnax museum of comb-making. The text is in French but this is still a useful reference and identification guide for non French speakers. The text is arranged in geographical sections.

Europe and the USA

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 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.