



Retro Hair Combs & Accessories

1970 - 1980

The Fashion Background

In this guide I will be looking at the hair accessories which were popular in the 1970s.

It is not easy to define 1970s fashion. From its early romantic hippy ethos to its later angry punk look, 70s fashion was a time of rapid development of new styles. An underrated era in terms of style, 70s fashion is being appreciated more and more with each passing year!

In the early part of the decade, 70s fashion was a continuation of the popular hippy look of the 1960s. However, although the hippy look retained its early romantic style and its fascination with exotic fashion items such as clothes made from Indian fabrics, it was moving away from its 1960s origins.

On the higher end of early 70s fashion was the development of romantic fashions created by designers such as Yves St Laurent, Ossie Clark, and Zandra Rhodes. As the 1970s continued, people began to dress in flashier styles that showed off their bodies. The mini skirt shortened to the micro-skirt. This new emphasis on design and classy hedonism would really take root in the emergence of disco fashion in the late 70s.

Disco fashion has been popularized in movies such as the John Travolta hit, Saturday Night Fever. Associated with the pumping drive of disco music and infamous party spots like Club 54 in New York, disco fashion is one of the most enduring remains of 70s fashion.

One of the biggest impacts of disco fashion in late 70s fashion is how it directly inspired a new fashion movement that many fashion experts feel is one of the most influential parts of 70s fashion. The punk fashion style developed as an angry response to the carefree attitude of disco fashion. Arty rather than sophisticated, punk fashion was not overly widespread during the 1970s. However, in future decades, punk fashion would be extremely influential and its influences can be seen in emo fashion and in current fashion trends such as Goth.

1970s Jewellery Design

The 1970s was not a decade which was particularly focused on jewellery. The fashion mantra was one of 'anything goes'. Women wore mini, midi and maxi length skirts, ethnic designs, and stretchy disco wear. In general, tastes remained a mix of the traditional and the exotic, with a holdover of the geometrically abstract designs from the previous decade.

Large jewellery designs were still worn at beginning of the decade but gradually became smaller and more conservative. The glitzy look diminished, and plain gold and silver ornaments became more prevalent. For decorative treatments enamelling was a favourite treatment, together with the use of semi precious materials like onyx, coral, turquoise, and jade rather than rhinestones.

1970s Hairdressing and Ornaments

There was a tremendous variety of hair 'looks' to be found during this decade. Some of these did not encourage the use of hair ornaments. For example the huge frizzed out Afro styles, and the sleekly hanging hair of the Hippies rarely used any other form of ornamentation. Nor did the shorter geometric cuts which came in mid decade. By contrast elaborate up-dos, heavily lacquered and teased, encouraged the use of small scatter combs and hair pins.

The Sculptured Metal Look

If the hippies, with their sleek centre parted hair worn *au naturel* are at one end of the 1970s hairdressing spectrum, at the other we find styles of the most amazing complexity. This was

particularly the case with formal up-dos for evening wear, which maintained their height and complexity by a combination of added hairpieces, teasing, and liberal coatings of hairspray.

These dressings were enlivened by the use of small scatter combs and hairpins which were placed among the curls and waves. Others were adorned by one or two important looking sculptural pieces. Typical treatments were three dimensional gold and silver tone shapes, often geometric or sleekly modernist, with fancy hammered effects. Another favourite decorative treatment was that of enamelling.



Picture 1: Sculptured metal hair comb 1970s

The large and handsome comb in picture 1, one of a pair, is typical of this group. These particular ornaments were made in the USA, and have the much beloved sidesweep or 'curly whirly' type heading in a particularly exaggerated form. Here the metal, which is a pale goldtone, has been given a bloomed effect, like the skin of a peach. Notice how the forward tail of the comb sweeps back upon itself in a whimsical manner, creating considerable drama and sense of dynamic movement.

The 'Back to Nature' Look.

This trend continued a popular taste for natural materials and motifs which began in the 1960s by the hippies. Body jewellery and hair accessories featured the use of shells (both real and artificial), ceramic, cork and wooden beads, fibres, and chips of semi precious materials such as turquoise, jade and agate which were drilled and used as beads.

A popular treatment for these kinds of materials was that of tumbling. This involves turning the materials in a revolving drum for days or even weeks until the surface is worn smooth. This brings out the inner beauty of the minerals in a unique way. Minerals and even ordinary pebbles treated in this way were popular ornaments, because they were viewed as being 'natural.'

Stylized leaf and flower designs, mostly without gemstones or rhinestones, were made in textured metal. These were often decorated with genuine mother of pearl or abalone, or synthetics simulating these effects. Large glass nuggets, beans, seeds, dyed bone, and plastic were freely used to imitate semi precious stones.



Picture 2: Hippie influenced hair styles and ornaments, *Hairdressing* 1972

Picture 2 is taken from Hairdressing magazine of the 1970s and shows some contemporary stylings and ornaments which are still clearly influenced by the Hippies. The 'cute little girl' look by which the models are depicted is very much of its time, and is a continuation of the influence of the early international supermodels such as Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton. Many of the popular hair accessories continued the dangling tendency which had begun in the late 1960s. Attached pendants were decorated with bells, leaves, beads and feathers.

The Miriam Haskell Company was still one of the most prominent in the field of costume jewellery, and continued to produce the aforementioned side combs which featured a wide range of decorative treatments in this back to nature genre. Pictures 3 and 4 are typical examples of the ornaments which were produced as both singles and pairs during this period.



Picture 3: Back to nature hair comb with bone and ceramic beads, Miriam Haskell

Both of these ornaments are made in typical Haskell fashion. The ornamental elements are hand wired onto the heading and are secured at the back with little gilt metal rosettes. These rosettes are one of the hallmarks of Haskell hair combs. So too is the signature Miriam Haskell to be found in a gilt metal oval cartouche on the back of the ornament.



Picture4: Miriam Haskell hair comb with aventurine chips

The comb in example 3 has as its centrepiece a large spherical red glass or ceramic bead. This is flanked by others in varied shapes: oval and saucer shaped and made from bone. Some of the shapes are dyed black, while others have been left their natural colour. In between are placed small gold coloured metallic beads.

Example 4 is decorated in a similar manner with chips of the mineral aventurine, drilled and used as beads. Small gold beads identical to those used in comb 3, and spheres of pale blue glass also decorate the heading. Aventurine is a form of quartz distinguished by its translucency and by the presence of small inclusions which give it a glistening effect. It comes in a range of colours but the characteristic one associated with it is the blue green seen here.

The mineral has been formed into polished pebbles of irregular size and shape by the aforementioned process known as tumbling. I have seen similar Haskell comb headings decorated with tumbled gemstones made from amethyst, turquoise matrix, striped agate and rose quartz.

Ethnic and Cultural Influences

We see the continued popularity of various ethnic influences in costume jewellery and hair accessories during the period. This is, in reality, an extension of the back to nature look.

One of the most popular of these was, as in the 1960s, the Egyptian look. We have noted how the publicity and hullabaloo surrounding the blockbuster film Cleopatra created an appetite for Egyptian hairdressing and ornaments in the mid 1960s. However in the following decade, the general public were offered the opportunity to see the real thing for themselves. In 1977 the touring exhibition of the king Tutankhamen created as much popular excitement as it did back in the 1920s when the treasure was first discovered. Just as then, the treasure prompted a vogue for an Egyptian look with scarabs, snakes, lotus, and so on.



Picture 5: Miriam Haskell Egyptian style comb

Picture 5 shows another Miriam Haskell comb in the Egyptian taste. This one shows the mask of a Pharaoh superimposed upon the classic wings motifs and with a supporting Ibis at each side. This comb is particularly well made and in nice relief detail.

Another ethnic influence which gained popularity at this time was for Aztec looking patterns and designs. Picture 6 shows a gold tone barrette with a design of three faces. One is placed in the centre of the ornament and the other two presented on the horizontal plane at either side. This ornament, which is in solid brass, is of the type where a bar passes through holes in the base plate to hold it in position in the hair.



Picture 6: Aztec style goldtone metal barrette

Artisan Designer Jewellery

We have seen in a previous guide that the work of American fashion and jewellery designer Lee Menichetti traversed several decades. Each of his ornaments is a one off- individually crafted and hand made. Picture 7 is a very beautiful headband ornament by this designer. The band is covered with pale champagne coloured velvet to which are attached a number of hand crafted flowers. These have been individually cut out of thin metal and then painted to represent tiger lilies. The flowers are accompanied by leaves and foliage.



Picture 7: Handmade floral headband by Lee Lenichetti

Picture 8, another Menichetti handcrafted hair ornament, is one of a pair of very unusual combs. The heading is composed of a moon shaped piece of silver leather. This is heavily encrusted with cabochons and beads in antiqued gold and faux coral, which form small flowers. More beads in silver and gold tone hang from the bottom forming pendant drops.



Picture 8: Lee Menichetti hair comb with faux coral and gold tone beads

Another artist craftsperson associated with this decade is French born Lea Stein who was born in Paris. She began making her unusual jewellery in 1969 when her husband, Fernand Steinberger, came up with a process of laminating layers of rhodoid (cellulose acetate sheets) with interesting textures and colours. The layers were baked overnight with a secret component of his creation and then cut into shapes for various designs of pins, bracelets,

earrings and shaped decorative objects. From the side, you can see, in some pieces, as many as 20 layers of cellulose bonded together to make these pieces.

Although Lea Stein began by hand making individual pieces, her company evolved into a commercial enterprise which was mass producing jewellery, albeit of a very high standard. The vintage period of Lea Stein's jewellery was really a very short one of twelve years from 1969 to 1981. At its zenith the company employed 50 workers. However it eventually failed due to the influx of Asian competition.

After the failure of her company in 1981, a far sighted American dealer in New York bought a big part of her remaining stock and began selling her jewellery in the US. It was not until then that the trademark Lea Stein pieces began to be well known in the USA. After 1988 Lea Stein returned to designing jewellery. Her pieces today are eagerly sought after by collectors.



Picture 9: Lea Stein 3-D fox hair comb

Picture 9 shows a hair comb decorated with one of the most easily recognisable Stein motifs, the 3-D fox. This is a classic has been produced in a myriad of colours and designs. Often, lace or metal layers were incorporated into the celluloid, which produced an astounding number of unique textures. This one is done in muted shades of grey, resembling a mother of pearl effect. The 3-D fox's tail is looped from one piece of celluloid. Although many of Lea Steins pieces are signed, none of these hair combs or smaller pins items appear to be marked. However, they are recognizable by the colours and textures that only Lea Stein could create.

The hands-on jewellery making process begins by laminating over 200 different layers of Italian cellulose acetates sheets together, resulting in a textured sandwich. A special adhesive is then applied. The item is then baked overnight in order to blend all the ingredients. After cooling, the material is cut into intricate patterns for mounting upon various forms of jewellery.

Inspiration From the Past

A final trend which we can distinguish in late 1970s jewellery design is that of inspiration from the past. There was a particular fascination with the Art Deco period. Working in the UK, Ken Lane made jewellery in this style decorated with glass and enamel in geometric designs. There was also a revival in the popularity of marcasite jewellery.



10: Art Deco inspired figural 'hand' comb

Picture 10 shows a very Art Deco-influenced design in the form of a comb whose heading is formed as a figural hand. The hand motif is made in faux mother of pearl inset with clear and red rhinestones and small gold tone dots. The design is further embellished with gilding.

In the late 1970s the glitz and glamour returned to jewellery design and fashion with the rise in popularity of disco wear. The era of Glam Rock, Power Dressing and Big Hair dawned, bringing with it a taste for rhinestones, rhinestones and more rhinestones.

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.

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.