



Retro Hair Combs & Hair Accessories

1950 - 1960

Two Important Styles

In the 1950s, when there were basically two different styles or looks which were favoured for hair accessories and jewellery:-

The first was the *Baroque* or *neo-Baroque* which was pure glamour and glitz, favouring glittering rhinestones combined with coloured stones and materials, faux pearls and elaborate gold or silver tone settings. Such ornaments were worn predominantly for evening.

The second was the *Modernist* style, an overhang from the Art Moderne of the 1930s. This was a more subdued but sculptured look, relying upon its shape and texture for effect, rather than added embellishment. This simpler and perhaps more sophisticated type of ornament was considered suitable for day wear.

Obviously not all the hair ornaments produced fall neatly into one category or another and there was a great deal of overlap between these two predominant 'looks'.

The Impact of the 'New Look'

In retrospect we see the fashions of the 1950s as being extremely glamorous and feminine after the sharp and tailored look of the 1940s. After the austerity and shortages experienced in Europe during World War II people were longing for more glamour and glitz. This came in 1949 with the advent of the so-called 'New Look' introduced by the fashion house of Dior, and quickly followed by other *haute couture* Paris designers. Dior presented women with a much more feminine silhouette. This included longer and fuller skirts, a small waist, a low heart shaped neckline and hair dressed in a glamorous updo. This New Look brought with it a taste for more glamorous and lavish jewellery, and even tiaras returned.

Design of the time favoured jewellery and personal ornaments that were light and simple in design terms for day wear, whereas for evening glamour and a certain amount of exaggeration were in order. There was a new willingness to experiment with new techniques, designs and combinations of different materials. The United States led the fashion, and now took over from Paris as the foremost producer of high quality costume jewellery, in tune with the new fashions.

The 'Real' Thing

In the 1950s, much costume jewellery was glitzy and sometimes ostentatious, continuing the neo-Baroque style which had begun in the 1940s. Some of the most beautiful and high quality neo Baroque style jewellery and hair ornaments were produced in the USA. We can say that the influence of Hollywood and the great screen goddesses of the 1940s and 1950s was of great significance in promoting this larger than life look.

Early in the decade, it was designed to mimic the *real thing* with, at times, a slight exaggeration. For instance, many top-of-the-line manufacturers designed almost exact duplicates of designs by Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels. The major difference, of course, was that the lovely ornaments were not made of gold or platinum or set with precious gemstones. They were made of base metals that were gold-plated or rhodium-plated and set with synthetic stones or glass imitations from Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Many costume jewellery manufacturers produced these sets in sterling silver or base metals that were plated in non-tarnishable rhodium. Occasionally some sets were even gold-plated. The Austrian crystal company, Swarovski, supplied huge amounts of glass stones, so manufacturers were able to satisfy the millions of women who wanted to wear this type of glamorous faux jewellery.



Picture 1: Rhinestone and faux pearl tiara by Weiss

Picture 1 shows a wonderful silver tone, rhinestone and faux pearl tiara signed by Weiss. It is made in the elaborate neo Baroque style which characterises much fine mid 20th century American costume jewellery. This beautiful silver tone tiara is made in brilliant rhinestones in an elaborated arcaded design, which is hung with spherical faux pearls.

The Weiss Company (1942 – 1971) flourished during the 1950's and 1960's, offering high quality costume jewellery with excellent Austrian rhinestones of exceptional quality and clarity. Its beautiful rhinestone studded jewellery is avidly sought nowadays by collectors. Weiss jewellery offered high quality costume jewellery using excellent Austrian diamante or clear and coloured and aurora borealis rhinestones of exceptional quality and clarity, faux pearls, clear and glass collared stones with antique and gold-tone, silver-tone and Japanned metal settings. Weiss jewellery is comparable to Eisenberg and Bogoff jewellery in quality. Without a doubt, the company manufactured some of the most beautiful and appealing rhinestone jewellery of the post World War II era.

The Development of Aurora Borealis Rhinestones

In 1953, the Aurora Borealis rhinestone was developed. This stone has an almost iconic place in the appearance of neo-Baroque style jewellery, and is often misunderstood. It was made by applying an iridescent coating to clear glass stones to create a rainbow effect. Aurora Borealis stones, generally shortened to AB rhinestones, are not found in jewellery and hair ornaments before the mid 1950s, and so this is one way of dating a piece.

The pretty little hair comb in picture 2 is typical of small side combs worn at this period. It has a typical clear Lucite base with split prongs, but the heading is the very essence of the neo-Baroque style. The asymmetric design heading is in the form of a leaf or fern frond, with the tip inclined to the right. It is encrusted with very beautiful AB rhinestones in prong settings. There are two different cuts: spherical and marquise shaped. Also the stones are in several graduated sizes. This variety, rather than having the stones all of one shape or size, is one of the hallmarks of quality costume jewellery, especially in a small piece such as this. This lovely comb was probably intended to be one of a pair, with a partner in a mirror image. They would have adorned the glamorous updo of a lady of fashion.



Picture 2: Neo-Baroque styled hair comb with AB rhinestones

This richly encrusted appearance is typical of the period and is found in another small hair comb in picture 3. This one is attached to a small comb of faux tortoiseshell and is, again, one

of a pair. It takes the whimsical form of a starfish. As motifs, all sorts of flora and fauna were universally popular, especially in brooches. Mammal, fish and bird designs were the big sellers, while the major motifs remained flowers and leaves. However these designs are found in other small ornaments, such as side combs and earrings.

This little comb is not of the same quality as that in picture 2. The stones at first glance appear to be prong set, but are in fact held in by adhesive. However this is still a very pretty little ornament of the middle range of costume jewellery. The iridescent colours of the AB rhinestones and the richly engraved and detailed appearance of the metal in which they are set gives a very rich and attractive effect.



Picture 3: Baroque styled starfish hair comb in goldtone with AB rhinestones

Aurora Borealis crystal beaded jewellery also became the rage in the late 1950s. Hair combs, necklaces, bracelets, earrings and brooches were fashioned from these lovely iridescent multi faceted beads. Picture 4 is an example of what is termed a tiara comb. This is so called because the tines or prongs are set at a 45 degree angle from the heading, which stands up proud from the head of the wearer. In wear the tines are concealed beneath the front hair and the upstanding heading gives the effect of a mini tiara.

This pretty ornament, although of the cheaper variety of hair ornaments, gives an attractive impression. Faceted crystal and faux pearl beads are threaded onto fine wires to give a delicate fairylike effect, and a trembler crystal drop hangs from the centre front.



Picture 4: Tiara style comb in faceted crystal and faux pearls

Not all the Aurora Borealis hair accessories produced were in the elaborate neo-Baroque style. Some ornaments have a very simple profile, and gain their effect purely from the beauty of the multi coloured stones. Picture 5 shows a pretty little leaf shaped barrette with a very simple outline and construction, which relies purely upon the beauty of its stones for impact. In this example the individual stones are prong set into gold tone metal. Notice too the means of fastening, whereby a double metal bar is spring loaded to fit into a pair of catches on the back of the ornament. The modern spring loaded so-called French clip is not found on hair jewellery of this period, and this double or single bar is a typical means of securing the ornament.



Picture 5: Barrette, goldtone and AB rhinestones

Most of the hair ornaments worn at the beginning of the decade were still fairly modest in size. One favourite seem to have been the comb-clip. This is where the ornament is provided with a spring loaded clip connecting the tines to the heading, which allows it to be used in a number of different ways. A typical hair comb of the period is seen in illustration 6. Besides functioning as a hair ornament this versatile little jewel 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.



Picture 6: Forget-me-not neo-Baroque style comb clip

This is a perfect example of the costume jewellery of the period. It is designed as a formalised spray of flowers, one of the most prevalent styles in neo Baroque jewellery. The metal and setting are chromed silver tone, and the plant intended to be represented is the Forget-Me-Not. Of course this flower, along with others such as the rose, pansy and clover, has sentimental and deeply symbolic connotations. Therefore it is fully in tune with the romantic spirit of the times. Here the flowers are enlivened with pale blue enamel and have faux pearls of the same colour set at their centres, making this an exquisite little ornament.

Picture 7 shows a selection of hair combs from an American wholesaler's catalogue of the mid to late 1950s. We can see that they are larger and more elaborate than the ornaments which were generally favoured in Europe. A particular favourite seems to have been the previously mentioned tiara style comb, in which the heading is raised at a 45 degree angle from the teeth. These combs could be worn singly, as a mini tiara, or in pairs when the elaborate design stretched across the crown of the head. The pretty pearl and crystal tiara comb illustrated at picture 4 is of this type.



Picture 7: Baroque style hair combs of the 1950s, US wholesale catalog

Another favourite with American designers appear to have been the curly whirly or sidesweep type asymmetrical design, an example of which is seen in picture 8. These asymmetrical styles appear in all materials, colours and styles and seem to have lasted well into the next decade. Some of the prettiest examples consist of a line of diamante with a spherical faux pearl affixed to each end. Others are adorned with coloured or AB rhinestones. However there are simpler, more sculptural examples which are simply of polished or textured metal, or fancy effect celluloid of some type. Among the pretties are those with a mother of pearl effect set with AB rhinestones.



Picture 8: Sidesweep hair comb in hammered metal

This large ornament, fully four inches long, is of the more sculptural type. It has a heading of antiqued gold tone metal with a textured finish which is more typical of jewels in the Modernist style. Large metal flowers, made of contrasting brass and copper effect petals, are set at either end.

The Modernist Style

The modernist style in jewellery with its asymmetry and clean lines is a natural successor of the late Art Deco style of the 1930s, also called Art Moderne.

Modernist ornaments are simpler and more sculptural. Rather than being embellished with faceted stones they rely upon minimal surface decoration and upon the excitement of movement and drama for their impact. We find many of these little brooches and hair ornaments in asymmetrical styles which are suggestive of motifs like leaf and flower sprays, bows of ribbon, cornucopia, and so on. Often the shape of a leaf or plant is treated in a very formalistic, rather than a naturalistic, manner. This is in line with the Modernist concentration upon form and function in an object, rather than extraneous decorative effect.

Some are nevertheless minimally decorated with solitaire rhinestones or faux pearls. The majority add interest through the use of surface decoration such as filigree, engraving or the contrasting of shiny and matte surfaces.



Picture 9: Modernist inspired hair comb with sculptural profile

Picture 9 is one of a pair of side combs which are excellent examples of this latter type. The usual faux tortoise comb mount is topped off with a sculptural heading of textured gold tone. This is formed as a series of scrolls or wave-like motifs which curl over to the left. The companion piece of this pretty comb is a mirror image. The metal itself is an antiqued gold tone and is enlivened with decoration in the form of moulding and a kind of surface bloom on the metal.

Miriam Haskell

No discussion on the hair ornaments of the Retro 1950s period would be complete without some comment on the work of Miriam Haskell. One of the foremost American jewellery designers of the 20th century, the work of the Haskell Company spanned several chronological decades and numerous aesthetic styles. Haskell produced many hair ornaments and, regardless of the style in which they were conceived, the items are invariably of a high standard.

Miriam Haskell began making jewellery on a commercial basis in the 1920s. It was not until the late 1940s that Haskell jewellery started to be marked for the first time. As fashion returned to the pages of the newspapers, designers began actively marketing their creations and growing their businesses.

Haskell jewellery is known for its use of elaborate filigree and careful wiring, all handmade and accommodating a variety of designs. Miriam Haskell hair accessories, no matter how apparently simple the motifs, are noted for their minute detailing when compared with contemporary products. Quality is always evident, even with the plainest designs.

Like her predecessors in the Art Nouveau era Haskell, sought to design and manufacture jewellery that evoked nature in their subjects and construction. Early Haskell pieces are therefore characterized by the dominance of flowers, leaves and themes taken directly from, or inspired by, nature in the design.



Picture 10: Goldtone leaf hair comb signed by Miriam Haskell

The final illustration is a Modernist example by Miriam Haskell. The heading is formed as a very naturalistically treated gold tone leaf. This item is beautifully hand made with the leaf

motif attached by gilded wire to the heading, and not simply riveted on. It is secured on the rear with the small flower shapes which are typical of the Haskell workshop, and bears the signature of the designer on an oval goldtone plaque. The leaf itself is very nicely made with fine detailing of the veins.

This example probably dates from the early to mid 1950s. From the late 1950s and into the 1960s the designs of Haskell jewellery became more vibrant, colourful, and feminine, under the new Baroque influence. Many pieces incorporate the use of pearls. Some designs, particularly necklaces, were incredibly elaborate, combining stones, pearls, beads, and filigree in new and exciting ways. While generally not as elaborate as her necklaces, Haskell hair combs still contain a wide variety of styles. As we move into the 1960s we encounter increasing enrichment by the use of enamel, and encrusted beads and pearls. New influences, such as the Hippy and various ethnic cultures can also be discerned as we move into the 1970s.

However the hair accessories of the 1960s onwards are another story.

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.