



Retro Hair Combs & Hair Accessories

1960 – 1970 (Part 1)

The 'Swinging' Sixties

In the 1960s the world of fashion changed completely and became much more diverse. The decline of *haute couture* gave way to a less expensive ready-to-wear clothing industry. Unlike the previous decades when Paris was the focus of the fashion industry, London now took centre stage. Fashion became a witty, animated cartoon, all fun and fancy, with conventions about daytime and evening wear summarily tossed out the window.

Not surprisingly radical changes in jewellery followed the rapidly changing fashions. Exaggerated jewellery and accessories were used to complement the simpler clothing styles, creating a completely new total look. In previous generations it was older people who had set the style. Until the 1950s young women had followed the example of their mothers in what they wore. In the 1960s young people, especially the groups who called themselves Hippies and Mods, exerted a tremendous influence upon fashion.

However there were other important influences at work. The Do-Your-Own-Thing credo of the 1960s transformed the worlds of jewellery and fashion design by encouraging the notion of individual expression far beyond the parameters set in the 50s. This promoted the idea of the individual artisan designer far more vigorously than hitherto.

For these reasons a number of different strands for the 'look' of hair accessories can be traced in the 1960s. These can be summarised as follows:-

1. **Continuing neo-Baroque look from the 1950s**, which favoured the use of elaborate settings and larger than life rhinestones, often brightly coloured.
2. **Op Art fashion** of geometric type designs, favoured by the Mods.
3. **An ethnic look** favoured by the Hippies, often incorporating natural materials like shells, seeds or feathers.
4. **Works of individual artisan-designers**, usually hand made and intricate.

In this guide I shall examine the first of these two important influences, while 1960s Part II will detail the second two.

The Neo-Baroque Influence

Although fashion in the mid and late 20th century changed more quickly than hitherto, with items sporting a particular 'look' disappearing from the high street almost overnight, what people in general actually wear changes more gradually.

In the 1950s we noted the development of the Neo-Baroque style in jewellery and hair accessories. This favoured the use of thickly encrusted rhinestones, particularly coloured and AB stones, and their combination with faux pearls and other colourful materials in very lavish and rich settings. Some of the most beautiful and innovative of ornaments in this style were produced in the USA.

Such jewellery was favoured by more mature fashionable women, whose complex upswept coiffures created an opulent look. Jewellery made from rhinestones remained firmly in fashion with this group, but much more dramatically styled than in the previous decade. Nothing was too glitzy, large or luxurious.

Bouffant Hairstyles

The hairdressing of the late 1960s and early 1970s was increasingly elaborate, with great use of back combing to produce a bouffant effect. The most dramatic style was an elaborate updo called the beehive after its domed shape. These eye catching hairstyles cried out for the use

of elaborate hair ornaments, which staged a dramatic comeback. An example of such hairstyles can be seen in picture 1, which is a photograph taken from *Hairdressing* magazine of the mid 1960s.



Picture 1: Fashionable bouffant hairstyles of the 1960s

The bouffant hairstyle dated back to the late 1950s, but was popularised in the USA by America's First Lady Jackie Kennedy, one of the greatest fashion icons of her time. As the 1960s progressed, a generation of Hollywood skilled hairstylists and an entire generation of glamour girls brought it to a peak of popularity.

By the mid 1960s the bouffant had reach the peak of its growth and became synonymous with star-studded evening events. The style proved to be a perfect accompaniment to the long, off the shoulder sequinned and embroidered evening dresses which became popular. The bouffant hairdo certainly epitomised a woman's crowning glory whenever she wanted to be noticed. However such hairstyles were difficult to maintain, requiring vast quantities of hair lacquer and vigorous back combing. By the end of the decade the elaborate bouffant had fallen out of favour, although very elaborate hairstyles continued into the 1970s.



Picture 2: Fashionable hair accessories 1962, *Hairdresser's Journal*

Picture 2 is an ad. from *Hairdressers Journal* for 1962 showing some of these very elaborate hair accessories which were in fashion. The ornate hair combs on the right are of the type that are made of faux tortoiseshell or faux mother of pearl. They are heavily encrusted with clear or AB rhinestones and small gold tone dots for a very rich effect.

Hair accessories such as these were sold through high end hairdressing salons in the 1960s. I can remember as a young woman passing such a salon on my way to work and admiring the elaborate and very expensive hair accessories with which the window was filled. Having long hair I wore it in the highest and most elaborate of styles, and collected a number of these beautiful neo Baroque style ornaments of the type shown in picture 3.



Picture 3: Pair of faux tortoiseshell barrettes mid to late 1960s

This is a matched pair of faux tortoiseshell barrettes which as we can see have the elaborate Baroque styling. They are designed in a mirror image of one another as a formalised leaf spray. The stylised leaves and stems are embellished by the ever popular AB rhinestones with small gold tone dots placed in between. Notice the clasps, which are of the old bar and knob style, used extensively before the invention of the modern French spring clip.

Even at the time such hair accessories were expensive. I can recall paying the equivalent of \$8 for a single comb and \$15 for a pair of similar items. This does not seem expensive now, but remember that back in the 1960s this represented a small fortune!

One of the most important designers of the period who is famous for her work in this elaborate and exotic style is Miriam Haskell. Haskell jewellery is known for its use of elaborate filigree and careful wiring, all handmade and accommodating a variety of designs. From the 1950s the designs became more vibrant, colourful, and feminine, under the new Baroque influence. Many pieces incorporate the use of faux pearls. Some designs during the fifties and sixties were incredibly elaborate, combining stones, pearls, beads, and filigree in new and exciting ways.



Picture 4: Baroque style hair comb by Miriam Haskell

Picture 4 is a wonderful and typical example of Haskell Baroque hair ornaments of this period. The elaborate gold tone heading has all the typical hallmarks: an asymmetrical design, lots of fat scrolls and interlaced work. It is set with a large turquoise matrix cabochon and smaller blue coloured faux pearls, making this a very eye-catching comb ornament.



Picture 5: Scatter hairpins set with AB rhinestones

Picture 5 shows two small hairpins of the scatter type which were intended to be placed here and there within these elaborate updo's. They consist of small but elaborate clusters of very

beautiful AB or aurora borealis rhinestones which are attached to hairpins of clear Lucite. The iridescent colours in the faceted stones of these two examples are particularly beautiful.



Picture 6: Typical USA made multi coloured rhinestone hair comb

Picture 6 is an example of the very beautiful and glitzy Baroque hair combs being produced in the USA at this time. The elaborate formalised twin bow design and the use of multi coloured combined with AB rhinestones in a richly textured gold tone setting is typical.

Op Art and the Mods

The kinds of ornaments worn by fashionable young women could not have been more different from those of their mothers.

Young people who called themselves Mods wore mini dresses and big bold jewellery enamelled in bright so-called psychedelic colours and patterns. Both clothing and jewellery featured the so popular Op Art, with bold designs and colours. Much Op Art clothing was predominantly black and white, such as the boldly striped and sequined mini shift evening dress illustrated in picture 7.



Picture 7: Black and white striped 'Op Art' evening shift dress

Other Op Art clothing featured bright primary colours twisted together in psychedelic designs. The great design houses, who now took their inspiration from the streets of London, responded accordingly with their own upscale and ready-to-wear versions.

Many non traditional materials were now used for fashion jewellery. Clear plastics, especially Lucite and Plexiglas, imitated crystal and were made into MOD jewellery. Coloured plastics were widely used, sometimes to imitate gemstones.



Picture 8: Black and white Op Art hair accessories

Although many young people wore the fashionable bouffant hairstyles, other influential looks appeared in hairdressing. One of these was the geometric cut introduced by Vidal Sassoon in 1963. This was an easy maintenance hairstyle, a variation of the traditional bob, based upon superb cutting and requiring no hair lacquer. These severe hairstyles cried out of ornamentation of some kind, and it came in the form of mass produced hair ornaments which were widely sold in budget chain stores.



Picture 9: Brightly coloured plastic Op Art hair comb

Pictures 8 and 9 show a selection of cheap and cheerful mass produced hair ornaments in the 'Op Art' style, of the type which were sold in middle to lower end stores. The plastic side comb in illustration 8 is made in zebra stripes, while the spiralling black and white patterns of the barrette are very eye catching. Picture 9 illustrates a model which was also available in black and white, as well as these very bright poster colours twisted together.

Mary Quant

London fashion designer Mary Quant is one of those famous names which will always be associated with the so-called 'Swinging 60s'. Her name is synonymous with such fashion trends as knee-high, white, patent plastic, lace up boots, and tight, skinny rib sweaters in stripes and bold checks. Many of her designs were in the Op Art stark contrasts of black and white or primary colours.

Despite having no formal training in fashion design Mary Quant opened her own fashion house in the fashionable Chelsea district of London where she exercised tremendous influence upon the clothing worn by a youth-orientated market.

Her Chelsea boutique was followed by the opening of the cult store Bazaar, firstly in trendy Kings Rd (Chelsea) and later in the highly fashionable Kensington High Street. These stores were a Mecca for fashionable young people in the 1960s and 1970s. I can vividly remember visiting them on trips to London when I was a young woman.

As her popularity grew Quant introduced other iconic fashion trends of the era such as the 'micro' mini skirt and 'hot pants'. She is undoubtedly one of the great fashion names of the 20th century.



Picture 10: Hair comb by Mary Quant

Mary Quant also introduced a range of jewellery and ornaments in her store, which included hair accessories. Picture 10 illustrates a hair comb signed *Mary Quant* on the back. It features a large and stiff metallic black bow attached to a comb with split prongs and further embellished with rhinestones at the centre. The spiky three dimensional quality of this ornament is very typical of fashionable hair ornaments and jewellery.

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 is 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.