



Retro Hair Combs & Hair Accessories
1980 – 1990 (Part 1)

The Return of Glamour

After becoming somewhat subdued and conservative in the 1970s the costume jewellery industry again flourished in the 1980s. A number of important influences combined to give women a new freedom and confidence to wear frankly fake fashion jewellery. In fact, the bigger and glitzier the better!

Unlike previous generations when rhinestone jewellery had been more favoured by mature women, this craze was for bright and glittery jewellery was followed by teenagers and older women alike. Rhinestones came to be worn on every possible occasion, not just in the evening. Diamante jewellery and pearls were worn on every possible occasion without embarrassment.

In this respect, a number of important influences which contributed to the popular taste can be identified.

1. **The 'Real Jewellery' Look:** inspired by Diana Princess of Wales.
2. **Nostalgic Historical Revivals:** imitation of historical periods.
3. **Frankly Fake:** inspired by the glitz and glamour of TV shows like Dallas and Dynasty and the influence of celebrities such as Madonna.
4. **Resurgence of Plastic Jewellery:** novelty themes and treatments such as prints, animal patterns, and so on.

In Part I will examine the influence of Diana Princess of Wales and the taste for jewellery in the style of earlier periods.

The Real Jewellery Look

In the UK Diana Princess of Wales provided an inspiration to women who liked the 'real jewellery' look, particularly diamonds and pearls. As Princess of Wales Diana wore many fabulous ornaments which has been passed down the British royal family for generations. Their design, particularly in tiaras, was lavish but somewhat conservative. This jewellery was, of course, made from real gemstones and was worn with couture gowns.



Picture 1: Diana Princess of Wales wearing one of her precious tiaras

Diana's romantic full skirted wedding gown began a fashion of 'big' and lavish wedding dresses which lasted for many years. Diana came from an aristocratic family background which also passed jewels from one generation to the next. To hold her veil the bride wore the

Spencer family diamond tiara, which is shown in picture 2. This beautiful tiara is made in a design of flowers and scrollwork which recalls 18th century designs.

Diana's influence as an international celebrity and fashion icon led to the resurgence in popularity of these kinds of personal ornaments which reproduced, or drew their inspiration from, the past.



Picture 2: The Spencer Family tiara worn by Princess Diana at her wedding

This led to revival for jewellery made in the opulent styles of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The British company Butler and Wilson started a vogue for wearing period jewellery, and this escalated into the making of new renditions of old pieces. Butler and Wilson manufactured a range of quality costume jewellery which included reproductions of the romantic jewellery of the 18th and 19th century, as well as Celtic, Art Nouveau and Art Deco jewellery. They created adaptations of the Princess of Wales jewellery for popular taste and the sale of tiaras for formal occasions such as weddings and proms increased.



Picture 3: Silver-tone and rhinestone tiara, Butler and Wilson

Above are two pictures illustrating tiaras made by this company. Picture 3 is a fairly simple open arcaded design with clear rhinestones set into plated silver. Picture 4 has a much more elaborate ornament and is literally encrusted with rhinestones in a gold tone setting with formal scroll motifs. Spherical faux pearls are placed here and there to further enliven the design.



Picture 4: Elaborate rhinestone and faux pearl tiara, Butler and Wilson

These kinds of ornaments were not, of course, intended for the mass market. Although they were not made with real gemstones they are still exquisite examples of the jeweller's art.

Picture 5 shows another beautiful Butler and Wilson ornament made in the romantic and naturalistic style of the 18th century. This lovely hair comb was intended for a wedding. The flowers and leaves design is made upon a foundation of chromed silver tone wire which is mounted with hand threaded faux pearl beads of several different shapes and sizes. Set in the centre of the flowers are clear rhinestones.



Picture 5: Pearl Hair Comb, Butler and Wilson

Inspiration from the Past

It was in the 1980s that the vogue for wearing vintage jewellery first became a veritable craze and this led to a number of companies producing jewellery in earlier styles for the mass market. Jewellery and fashion designers plundered multiple eras for their collections. Another spur for a romantic resurgence of earlier styles was provided by the sale of the Duchess of Windsor's fabulous jewels at Geneva in 1987. This promoted a vogue for ornaments in the Art Deco style.

The 1928 Jewellery Company from Burbank California produced designs inspired by the great stars of Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s. The company produced many side combs and barrettes in the style of the 1930s and 1940s. Such ornaments were sold in department stores across the USA.

With the taste for an Art Deco revival jewellery made from Marcasite returned to popularity in the 1980s, and the fashion continued into the 1990s. Copies of genuine Art Deco pieces were produced and the quality varies tremendously from one manufacturer to another. Inexpensive pieces with glued in stones were imported while the best had hand set marcasite.



Picture 6: Art Deco style marcasite hair comb by Kirks Folly

The very beautiful side comb in picture 6 is a signed example by the company Kirks Folly, who also made jewellery in this nostalgic and romantic style. This one has been given an authentic Art Deco look by incorporating a large geometric star which is set with faceted marcasite in several different sizes.

Gentle Romanticism and Fairytales

Kirks Folly is a family owned business specialising in romantic and fantasy themed jewellery and home accessories. Their collection covers a wide spectrum of themes, from romance to storybook legends.

The Kirks Folly story began in New York in 1979 when the creative genius of Helen Kirk sparked the inspired foresight of her sister Jennifer. Helen, who had always loved ornate, glittery objects and displayed a natural gift for design, took a simple pair of chopsticks and made them into extraordinary hair ornaments by wrapping them with embroidery thread, and attaching shells, prisms, charms, and beads. Jennifer was so impressed with Helen's creations (which she named Glitter Sticks), that she began a campaign to market them.

Her persistence resulted in a large order from one of the most exclusive stores in New York. As the resulting order was too large for the pair to fill by themselves, they recruited their brother, George, and sister, Elizabeth. Each sibling brought a unique skill to the fledgling company which resulted in a stellar combination of creativity, ability, and determination.

The company grew throughout the 1980s, but the major boost came in 1992 when the then new QVC television marketing network decided to take a chance on the whimsical jewellery designs. For this point the company has not looked back, and has continued to enjoy success with its highly individualistic jewellery and ornaments.



Picture 7: Hair comb in the romantic style with cherubs, Kirks Folly

In picture 7 we see another of the company's romantic style combs. This is one of a matched pair of side combs ornamented across the top of the heading by three figural silver tone cherubs or putti, set in a row. This pretty comb is signed on the band at the top of the heading.



Picture 8: Romantic style hair accessories with ceramic roses

Kirks Folly was not the only manufacturer to produce hair accessories and jewellery in the romantic mood at this period. Other popular elements which we find in jewellery are supplied by ornaments fitted up with porcelain roses, faux pearls and elaborate gold tone settings. The pair of delicate side combs in picture 8 is in this style. The combs here are made of metal, rather than the more familiar faux tortoiseshell or clear Lucite. Each has been fitted with a heading made up of a number of hand wrought ceramic flowers, representing roses in whimsical colours and various stages of bloom.

Darker Influences

In complete contrast to all this gentle romanticism was the influence of the Goth subculture. This began in the United Kingdom during the early 1980s in the gothic rock scene, an offshoot of the post-punk genre. Its imagery and cultural proclivities indicate influences from nineteenth century Gothic literature. The Goth subculture has associated tastes in music and fashion and became a world wide fashion movement.

Goth fashion is stereotyped as a dark, sometimes morbid, eroticized fashion and style of dress. Typical Gothic fashion includes dyed black hair, dark eyeliner, black fingernails, with black or very dark period styled clothing borrowed from the Victorian or medieval period. Personal jewellery used often expresses catholic or other religious imagery, such as crucifixes or ankhs. Other favourites are those creatures traditionally associated with death (particularly vampires), such as bats, spiders, skeletons and skulls.



Picture 9: Goth influenced skeleton hand hair accessory

The final two illustrations show how Goth influenced symbolism subsequently entered mainstream fashion and has been taken up by *haute couture* fashion designers and manufacturers of costume jewellery. Picture 9 shows a model wearing a hair barrette in the form of a skeleton hand. Picture 10 is a highly individualistic headband or tiara of silver tone depicting three bats set upon a band. The bodies of the creatures are formed of large red glass cabochons, while smaller glass 'jewels' are placed at intervals in the openwork wings which extend outwards.



Picture 10: Goth influenced tiara with bat symbols

In the next of these guides I will examine some of the other important influences which contributed to the fashion 'look' of the 1980s, including the glitzy 'Dallasty' look, and the popularity of fabulous fakes, big hair and power dressing.

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.