



Spanish Mantilla Combs (Peineta)

Part 2

Dressing Up and Fancy Parties

However this absence of Spanish type combs from the wardrobe of the fashionable lady was not to last long, for they returned with a vengeance in the Art Deco period, and were to enjoy a further two decades of popularity.

One reason for this was the vogue for fancy parties, amateur theatricals, and dressing up generally. It was the custom for the wealthy upper classes to spend long weekends at the country houses of their friends and relations. This was an important part of forming social relationships, and many romances blossomed and marriages were arranged in this way.

We must remember that in those days there was no radio, television or Internet with which people could amuse themselves. So in a very real way people had to make their own entertainment by dressing up in fancy costumes. Indeed every attic had its dress up box. Probably because it was so flattering to ladies of all ages, Spanish costume was one of the favourites. Many famous actresses and theatrical artists of the day had themselves portrayed dressed as Spanish ladies, or took part in plays and revues with a Spanish theme.

Picture 1 dates from around the turn of the 20th century and is an example of the costume picture postcards which were tremendously popular at that time. Many of these portrayed well known people such as actors and actresses, or royalty. Along with fashion magazines they were an important element in providing people with ideas of how to choose clothes and accessories. This one shows the then famous music hall actress Marie Studholme (1875-1930) an English musical comedy actress who was considered one of the greatest beauties of her time. Picture 1 shows her in a costume for a successful West End musical called *The Toreador* which opened in London in 1901.



Picture 1: Marie Studholme wearing a Peineta in *The Toreador*

The actress is dressed (or somewhat over dressed) in a very elaborate version of Spanish costume. She certainly has all the right elements: a high *Peineta* comb with a lace mantilla draped over it, and a folding fan. The gown is laced peasant style up the front and is trimmed with the kinds of bobbles found on a matador's costume. Picture 2 is taken from an early 20th century photograph of Spanish ladies at Fiesta time and illustrates the type of costume which was actually worn in Spain at this time.



Picture 2: Spanish ladies in Fiesta costume, early 20th century

So popular was this form of costume that certain elements of it became an integral part of fashionable dress in the Art Deco period. Picture 3 is from an engraved fashion plate dated 1922 in the British fashion magazine *The Queen*. Not only is the sitter wearing an updo which is propped up by a tall Spanish style comb but her dress actually consists of a Spanish style shawl with long fringes which is wrapped about her body.



Picture 3: Spanish influenced costume *Queen* magazine, 1922

We may well look back in wonderment now at this vogue for Spanish costume. However, this was simply one element of a widespread taste during these years for what could broadly be called the "exotic".

A Taste for the Exotic

One of the most important fashion influences in the early 20th century was the taste for ornaments in the spirit of the Arabian Nights, the Orient or of ancient Egypt. This was partly due to the fashion influence of couture designers like Paul Poiret, whose harem evening dresses were inspired by the costumes of the Russian Ballet. The ballet gave its first public performance in 1909, and its performance of the Arabian Nights fantasy *Scheherazade* took the capitals of Europe by storm. This led to a taste for jewellery and ornaments in what fashion designers felt to be the Oriental mode.

This taste for the exotic in personal ornaments was given a fresh impetus by the discovery of the tomb of the boy king Tutankhamen in the early 1920s. The stunning treasures revealed there was an inspiration to designers working in media of all forms. The development of early Hollywood films also encouraged the Egyptian look when various historical and biblical epics reached the silver screen. In particular Theda Bara took the role of Cleopatra in 1917 and Claudette Colbert played the same part in 1934.

These exotic Egyptian ornaments provided an ideal theme for costume jewellery and personal ornaments. However, designers did not aim at authenticity. Instead they translated the mystical and symbolic grandeur of Egypt with a somewhat indiscriminate air. Ornaments were fitted out with an affective assembly of stylised motifs. These included scarabs, hieroglyphs, winged falcons, the lotus and papyrus plants, and profile heads of a vaguely Egyptian character.

One of the most influential designers in this period was the Russian-born painter Romain de Tiroff, who called himself *Erté* after the French pronunciation of his initials. He was one of the foremost fashion and stage designers of the early twentieth century.

Erté is perhaps best remembered for the gloriously extravagant costumes and stage sets that he designed for the *Folies-Bergère* in Paris and George White's Scandals in New York, which exploit to the full his taste for the exotic and romantic, and his appreciation of the sinuous and lyrical human figure. As well as the music-hall, *Erté* also designed for the opera and the traditional theatre, and spent a brief and not wholly satisfactory period in Hollywood in 1925, at the invitation of Louis B. Mayer, head of Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer.



Picture 4: Exotic costume design by *Erté* with high comb

Picture 4 shows an illustration for one of *Erté*'s exotic and extravagant costumes. The model here is wearing a high Spanish style hair comb which appears to be covered in brilliants. However her costume bears no resemblance to that of Spain and is, if anything, somewhat oriental with its long fringes and exotic feather fan. The fact that these cultures had nothing whatsoever to do with Spain did not prevent the designers of fashionable hair combs from plundering the symbols of Egypt, China, Japan and the Islamic Middle East to provide decorative elements for these items of adornment.

Giant Hair Combs of the Art Deco Years

The stylistic movement known as Art Deco takes its name from the Paris Exhibition of 1925. It was from this event, the *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industrielles Modernes* that the shorter term Art Deco is derived. However the Deco influence began long before the 1920s, and has its roots in a previous style called Art Nouveau. You can read about the hair ornaments of the transitional period between Art Nouveau and Art Deco here.

The Art Deco movement, which lasted from approximately 1910 until well into the 1930s, was an extremely eclectic one. It has inputs from a number of different cultures such as the Orient, the Middle East, Africa and South America. There were also other important design elements such as the love of technology, speed and smooth modern materials like steel and plastic.

We can therefore appreciate that Art Deco was very much more than simply a 'geometric' style, which employed metals, plastics and mass production. On the contrary, it is a complex and highly sophisticated design movement in which many different contributory influences were melded and intertwined.

Some of the combs worn at this period were so huge that they resembled the high mantilla combs or *Peinita* worn by Spanish ladies with their traditional costume. In this section I will look at some examples of large Art Deco hair combs which are big enough to resemble the traditional Spanish *Peinita*.



Picture 5: Chinese style red lacquer hair comb

An important influence upon Art Deco was that of Far Eastern countries such as China and Japan. Hair combs having the glossy mirror like surface of Japanese or Chinese lacquer, or with the kinds of motifs seen in Japanese prints, were a particular favourite of the French designers. Hair combs in the 'Chinese' other oriental looking styles appeared.

Illustration 5 shows a large bright red hair comb simulating the appearance and look of Chinese lacquer furniture and ornaments. This one is a very elaborate example measuring fully 8 inches from the tip of the tines to the top of the crest. It has a fan shaped heading with a distinctive fluted shape and intricate openwork decoration. The colour red is important in Chinese culture and is considered to be lucky. For that reason it is the colour generally used for costume and decoration at weddings. The bright cinnamon red is therefore a hue which suggests Chinese lacquer ware.



Picture 6: Aztec influence hair comb by Auguste Bonaz

Designs from other cultures are often represented in watered down form in Art Deco comb designs. Picture 6 shows a huge Peinita like comb made by the high end fashion house of Auguste Bonaz. This comb, one I sold in 2005, measures 10 inches high from top to tines and 6 inches across. We can see that it is decorated with the kinds of stepped and radiating designs which are vaguely Aztec in derivation and still found in Mexican art. These radiating designs are greatly significant in the decoration of Art Deco comb headings, and are examined in detail in my guide on the various design elements found in such ornaments.

Other large ornamental combs I have seen are clearly been influenced by African symbolism similar to that found upon masks and other carvings. Tribal Africa was an important contributory influence to the art movement of Cubism and the early paintings of Picasso, another important input into Art Deco.

Therefore we can see that in early 20th century Britain the Spanish *Peinita* or mantilla type comb evolved in a way that was very different from its original national origins.

Auguste Bonaz, a Master Comb Maker

No discussion of hair combs during this period would be complete without a section on the workshop of Auguste Bonaz, the comb maker par excellence of the Art Deco era. You can find a fuller discussion of his work in my guide on the hair combs of Maison Bonaz.

The *atelier* Maison Auguste Bonaz is the most celebrated of all the Oyannox workshops, and received special mention for comb design in the Paris *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industrielles Modernes* of 1925 from which the term Art Deco is derived. So we can see that there is a very significant connection between the Bonaz workshop and the times in which these wonderful creations were produced.

Auguste Bonaz, gifted with an innate artistic sense, perfectly grasped the complex demands of the female consumers of the period. He saw that the comb must compliment not only the colour of the hair and headgear, but also the clothing, the time of day, and the occasion for which the ornament is used. The Bonaz collection was largely distributed through high end perfume shops and ladies hairdressers, as well as major department stores throughout France. The often very beautiful advertisements for Maison Bonaz which appear in both French and English magazines of the period are a collecting field in their own right.



Picture 7: Advertisement from *La Coiffure Francaise Illustree* 1928 for Maison Auguste Bonaz

Picture 7 shows a beautiful colour advertisement for the combs of Maison Bonaz from a French journal *La Coiffure Francaise Illustree* dated January 1928. Both sitters are given a very Spanish look by their very large mantilla style hair ornaments.

The model on the left appears to be wearing two very large matching combs in the traditional unfurled fan shape. They are decorated with the aforementioned radiating spoke like designs and with geometric patterns which are somewhat reminiscent of tribal Africa. She has a matching fan. The sitter on the right has a very large black filigree hair comb which surrounds the back of the head like an aureole. Her matching earrings are very Spanish looking. The exotic appearance of the presentation and models is very typical of advertisements for *atelier* Bonaz.



Picture 8: Large hair comb by Maison Bonaz showing peacock motif

Some of these early hair combs by Bonaz are nothing short of spectacular in the detail of their execution. Picture 8 shows a very lovely example from the Museum of Comb making at Oyannox which measures a whopping 15 x 7 ½ inches! This very beautiful ornament has intricately carved openwork heading which is further embellished by incised lines, gilding and small rhinestones. The design represents a very old one of two confronting peacocks which dates back into antiquity. The birds are presented against a background of radiating spoke like lines with a floral border.

The peacock was a favourite motif of Art Nouveau practitioners because it lent itself to a very fluid and naturalistic treatment. Although this lovely comb dates from about 1918, the transitional period between Art Nouveau and Art Deco, it still exhibits many elements of the Art Nouveau organic style.

A Leader in New Techniques and Materials

Maison Bonaz worked in new substances such as Bakelite and Galalith, and explored the versatility of the materials and their specific qualities. In retrospect we see that the work of House Bonaz was well in advance of its time. The work of Bonaz reflected the modern qualities of the Constructivist and Futurist art movements, which were highly important contributory influences to Art Deco.

In Modernism the emphasis was upon the medium, and the process of production, rather than the intrinsic value of the materials. It is the final effect which is important. Futurism discarded the art of the past in favour of change, originality and innovation. It glorified the new technology of the automobile, the thrill of speed and power and movement.

Another important influence upon Art Deco was that of the Bauhaus, which was an attempt to combine craftsmanship and high design with mass production. In this latter respect Bonaz succeeded admirably, for the ornaments produced by his workshop are always of the highest quality and finish.

The work of *atelier* Bonaz was amazingly varied and kept pace with changing fashions. Hair combs produced in the period 1910-early 1920s were often very large, elaborate and spectacular, with rich surface texture. These large Spanish style combs were worn in a very specific way which is illustrated in many fashion engravings of the period. They were thrust into the back hair, often at an acute angle, in such a way that they were visible from the back and sides. This allowed the beautiful openwork design or other decoration to be visible from all angles.



Picture 9: Red Peinita style hair comb, Maison Auguste Bonaz

Picture 9 shows a bright red comb by Auguste Bonaz which is so large that it resembles a Spanish *Peinita*. It has a high wedge shaped heading which is smooth and glossy like lacquer. The only adornment is a band of pierced decoration along the top. This comb is beautifully finished and is typical of the hair accessories made by the House of Bonaz at this time. All hair combs by Bonaz are signed in distinctive cursive script somewhere on the ornament, usually on the back of one of the tines. This signature is an important determinant of authenticity. However it is not unknown for Bonaz jewellery to be faked.

How Such Hair Combs Were Used and Worn

No account of these beautiful and spectacular ornaments would be complete without an appreciation of how they were worn. These large hair combs were worn in a very distinctive way, as we can see in picture 10, which is an illustration is from the front cover of *Vogue* for 1923. The comb worn by the sitter is so large and spectacular that it truly merits the description mantilla comb or *Peinita*.



Picture 10: Cover illustration showing Peinita, *Vogue* 1923

Such magazines kept people abreast with the latest styles in jewellery and ornaments, and also provided information on how these should be worn. There were also specialist magazines for the hairdressing profession, just as today. The *'Hairdressers Journal'* for June 1923 declared:

'Combs, jewelled, carved or plain, in many varieties of tortoiseshell, coral are carried out in all of the fashionable colourings. Many of these combs are really enormous and create a most becoming background. Most fashionable women wear them to one side and thus employed they are certainly chic, if a little difficult to carry off.'

We can see how the large and elaborate comb is thrust into the model's low coiffure in such a

way that it can be seen from all sides. Often these combs were worn at an angle, giving a very distinctive look. This permitted the beautiful design of the heading to be effectively outlined against the light when the wearer stood.

However as the Art Deco period advanced, fashions invariably changed. Many women adopted the short haircut known as the bob, or the even shorter boyish crop called the shingle. In these brief coiffures there was no place for giant hair combs, which needed a chignon to anchor them. Small hair combs continued to be worn but the large *Peineta* type hair combs of the 1920s were no longer in fashion.

Of course, was not the end of the *true Peineta*, which continued to be worn in its native Spain as before. These combs were also worn and appreciated in the USA because its closeness to Mexico and other Spanish speaking cultures of South America, where there was a tradition of large combs.

Interest in Spanish costume was to re-emerge in Europe the late 1950s and early 1960s with the growth of mass tourism to that country.

Further reading:

For those who would like to do some wider reading on the fascinating subject of comb collecting, the following books are strongly recommended:

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.