Simitra's
Exquisite Things

Victorian Combs & Hair Accessories

1870 - 1880

The changing fashion silhouette

With the beginning of the new decade, the crinoline skirt first altered its shape. From being a bell shape it became a flat fronted triangle, with the fullness concentrated at the back in a long train. As the decade progressed, the crinoline experienced a metamorphosis into the style which we now know as a bustle. However this term was never used in polite society where it was considered vulgar! The bustle was known as the dress improver!

Picture 1: Fashion plate from the French journal *Le Follet* showing the outline of 1874

Picture 1 shows a fashion plate dated 1874 from the French journal Le Follet with two modish ladies in their elaborate evening dresses. We can see that these sumptuous gowns, which only the wealthiest could afford, have now acquired a fully developed bustle at the back. The effect is as if the wearer is standing in front of her gown, and the effect is accentuated by the long train. We can also see that the gowns are loaded with all manner of flounces and trims especially on the train.

Hair styles grew, if anything, even more elaborate, with long dangling ringlets and as much artificial hair as ever is required. We can see this on the two fashionable ladies in picture 1. Both ladies are wearing elaborate floral wreaths, together with drop earrings and other imposing jewellery. However an important new fashion, or rather the return of an old one, was to become prominent in hair accessories. The Spanish mantilla comb returned to fashion.

Mantilla combs in high Victorian Britain

In the 1870s the high mantilla style comb also returned to popularity in Britain and other parts of Europe with the production of Bizet's opera Carmen in Paris in 1875. The opera is set in Seville in the 1830s and concerns the beautiful but tempestuous gypsy girl of the title whose beauty unintentionally entraps men. The opera was at first considered immoral, although it is now one of the most popular productions in the repertoire of major companies. The lead was played by the famous the famous mezzo-soprano Galli-Marié whose portrait in the role appears in picture 2.

Picture 2: The singer Galli Marie in her role of Carmen wearing a stage version of Spanish dress with high comb

The singer is obviously wearing a very fanciful version of Spanish costume in her role. However the salient points to notice are the high piled hair, the mantilla comb, and the very elaborate jewellery which can be compared with that of the two models in picture 1.

The term 'Spanish mantilla combs' is often used as a kind of umbrella category for any decorative hair comb with a high upstanding cresting that rises up proud from the top of the head when the comb is placed in position. However, the Spanish mantilla comb or *Peinita,* to give it the correct name, is rightly that comb which is part of the beautiful and traditional native dress worn in certain parts of Spain. The *Peinita* is particularly associated with the region of southern Spain known as Andalusia.

Picture 3: Cabinet photo of a young lady with a high mantilla comb, mid to late 1870s

Picture 3 is probably a more realistic portrayal of how a lady wearing a Spanish style comb would actually have appeared. It is taken from a cabinet photo of the mid to late 1870s and shows a very stylish young lady in the dress of the day. She is wearing a very high mantilla style comb with an elaborate pierced openwork design in her complex updo. We can see that voluminous coiffures which required a great deal of false hair had again returned to fashion. This lady has a great plaited chignon (probably false) atop her head and long ringlets trailing upon her shoulders. It is certain that no human head ever carried such an amount of hair naturally!

The Victorians loved posing for photographs and welcomed the new medium with great enthusiasm in both Europe and the USA. Many of these portraits are valuable to the social historian for their interesting details of the fashions and hairdressing of the time. More significantly they show how people actually looked, how fabrics draped, and how various ornaments were placed in the hair and upon the person.

Our example in picture 3 shows that these large Spanish style combs were worn in a characteristic manner. They were placed in the side or back of the hairdressing, sometimes at an angle, and in such a way that the tall heading stood up proud by several inches. This enabled the often beautiful openwork decoration or the decorative effect which had been applied to the material, to be viewed from all angles, and for the details to be seen effectively outlined against the light. This manner of wearing the decorative comb is shown in many fashion plates, photographs and picture postcards of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

Popular comb making materials and styles

The fashion journals of the 1870s inform us that hair accessories in metal set with stones ceased to be fashionable at this period. Their place was taken by combs in carved materials such as the perennial favourites: tortoiseshell, horn and ivory.

Tortoiseshell was undoubtedly the material of choice for mantilla combs. This material has nothing to do with land tortoises and is derived from the Hornsbill sea turtle. I shall not describe the incredible cruelty with which the creatures were deprived of their shells, for this was not a very conservation minded era.

The raw shell comes in two basic varieties. The dark brown variety which is attractively mottled with lighter spots of orange, brown or tan comes from the upper shell or carapace of the turtle. The lower portion or plastron is the source of the lighter, so called blonde variety of shell, which is the colour of pale honey. It is the latter variety which was most prized for the making or ornamental combs.

Picture 4: Hand carved tortoiseshell mantilla comb, mid 19th century

The beautiful tortoiseshell comb illustrated in picture 4 is an example of an ornament dating from the period 1870-80. This one has been hand carved with motifs resembling the peony and lotus flower, and was probably produced in the Orient for the European market. Such combs are replete with so-called Oriental symbolism, and often incorporate such motifs as dragons, pagodas, and figural sages as well as favourite flower and plant forms.

Chinese art is full of symbolism representing themes from the natural world. The lotus flower is one of the eight Buddhist symbols of good fortune. In Oriental culture the lotus flower is a symbol of purity, which rises unsullied through muddy water in which it grows. It symbolises the persistence of purity and tenacity despite the difficulties of the immediate environment. The Peony is another popular flower because its lush blossoms suggested abundance. It was believed to represent feminine energy.

Picture 5: Tortoishell mantilla style comb with elaborate pique decoration

A very beautiful and grand mantilla style hair comb from this period is shown in picture 5. This one has a series of balls across the tope gallery and three oval panels which are exquisitely decorated with pique inlay of gold, silver and mother of pearl. This comb is a particularly fine example of the genre.

This decorative treatment involves the inlaying of precious metals into another material, usually tortoiseshell, but occasionally horn or other substances. The technique has a long history, and was extensively used for the decoration of hair combs and other personal adornments during the reign of Victoria.

When gently heated, usually by insertion in hot water, natural organic materials like shell and horn soften to permit the inlaying of small pieces of metal or other substances. When cool, the ground material contracts to hold the pieces in tightly in place without the need for adhesive. Pique is usually found all in gold but in the very best pieces is combined with silver or other materials such as mother of pearl, and is applied in sheets as well as dots.

Picture 6: Clarified and dyed horn mantilla style hair comb

Picture 6 is an example of a horn mantilla comb from the same period. The material has been treated with heat and chemicals to render it semi translucent. It was then dyed to simulate the much prized and very rare blonde variety of tortoiseshell previously mentioned. This one has lacy carving in which fabulous beasts support a noble coat of arms. It was probably made in Europe. The darker tines show the natural colouration of the horn.

Horn was one of the most popular materials for hair combs throughout the 19th century. The material was cheap and easily obtained as a bi product of the meat industry. It could also be easily treated to obtain a number of decorative effects. It could be dyed a range of colours and was often treated to imitate the distinctive tortoise pattern of the more expensive material. This was achieved by painting it with various dyes and chemicals. Sometimes it was done with great artistry such that it is difficult to distinguish the horn from the genuine shell, particularly when two or three different colours were used.

Horn could also be clarified so as to be almost translucent as in picture 6. This gives it the attractive colour of honey, and is a feature of many fine combs of the period. It could also be carved, pierced, stamped and when heated, twisted into ornamental shapes in a plastic manner. Horn is an extremely flexible material, and when heated it can be bent, pierced and stretched into all manner of forms. Throughout the 19th century tortoiseshell was approximately 20 times more expensive than horn, which explains why horn was so often dyed to resemble the rarer material.

In the first part of the 19th century, the making of combs was still a handicraft, and most ornaments were made in small local manufactories. However by the mid century they were being produced in vast numbers by means of mechanical die-stamping. Polishing and finishing, including painting the horn with chemicals to simulate the tortoise markings, was usually undertaken in the UK as a cottage industry by women and children who were the families of the comb-makers.

The Oriental ivory trade

Ivory is one of the materials traditionally associated with comb making, and many attractive examples of the ornamental kind found their way to the West in the second half of the 19th century.

Chinese ivory carving found a market in the West almost as soon as trading-links had been established. The demand was such in fact that the various countries involved established trading posts or factories on Chinese soil. Here goods would be procured and even produced specifically for export to the West.

The principal centre for this practice was the city of Guangzou (or Canton as it would be known in the West after the 1839-1842 Opium War). The city was situated on the Pearl River delta near the South China Sea. Canton was culturally and economically the most important city in south China, and a hub of trade in all manner of artefacts, including ivory. Furthermore, Canton was and is today one of the three significant centres for ivory carving in China, the others being Beijing and Shanghai.

The company Heinr. Ad. Meyer reported that in the years 1879 – 1913 annual global consumption of ivory was at its highest and 138,000 kgs of that imported was made into combs.

The highly skilled craftsmen produced a myriad of intricately carved curios and ivory ware that both fascinated and intrigued the Western market, at the highest levels. Among the export goods were a range of personal ornaments and jewellery which often featured traditional Oriental motifs such as dragons, phoenix, chrysanthemums, lotus and so on. The ornamental combs were sometimes made in sets with a large back comb and two side combs in complimentary designs.

Picture 7: Carved ivory Oriental comb with sages

Picture 7 is a fine and typical example of a carved ivory comb made in China for the export market. The ornament is carved entirely in one piece. It has a beautiful openwork pattern which shows the signs of the tools used to hand carve it. The figural design appears to be a representation of a sage teaching his pupil or disciple. The figures are seated beneath trees which are beautifully carved.

Picture 8: Ivory comb intricately carved with flowers

Picture 7 is another carved ivory comb, possibly made in Europe from imported ivory. Throughout the 19th century there was a centre for ivory carving in Dieppe which specialised in floral motifs. This most beautiful of combs has three rectangular panels, each of which shows a rose with its leaves against lacy foliage. The workmanship is truly exquisite.

In 1876 Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India, thus stimulating a passion for Indian arts and crafts. Combs of carved ivory decorated with lotus flowers were among the items produced. Others were made in elaborate and delicate filigree work which was imported from India in the 1880s onwards, some being enriched with pearls, enamels and turquoise.

Victorian mourning combs

In the previous guide I devoted a section to a discussion of Victorian mourning ornaments. The strict observation of mourning continued for the entire second half of the 19th century and well into the 20th.

In 1861 a great tragedy overtook Queen Victoria when Prince Albert, her beloved consort, died prematurely of typhoid fever. Albert was a significant influence on his wife and did a great deal to promote the arts during his lifetime. Victoria was overwhelmed by grief and remained in mourning until the end of her life. Following his death the queen withdrew from

public life for a considerable period, even refusing to see her ministers and conduct the business of the state.

Following on from Victoria's example the observation of mourning became an obsessive cult in England, and an increasingly important social custom. Victorian mourning fashion was aimed mainly at women, widows in particular. The fashion had a way of isolating a widow in her time of need just as the Queen had done. For the first year, a woman who was in mourning was not allowed to exit her home with out full black attire and a weeping veil. Her activities were initially restricted to church services.

However mourning attire was the perfect way to show the wealth and respectability of a woman. There was a very strict etiquette as to what could be worn. Widows and close relatives of the dear departed had to wear unrelieved black for at least a year. At the end of that time, they could begin to do what was called "slighting" their mourning. This means that they could begin to move away from deepest black by adding touches of grey, purple or white, or a small quantity of (jet) jewellery. But strong colours were forbidden.

Picture 9: Hard rubber or Vulcanite mourning comb, 1870s

In these circumstances only the most sombre jewels could be worn, such as those in dull dark materials like onyx or jet. Jet is a natural mineral which occurs on the north eastern coast of the United Kingdom in the area of a two called Whitby. During the latter half of the 19th century an entire industry grew up to provide jet jewellery to service the mourning industry. It is not surprising that the supply of the natural material soon became exhausted. For this reason a number of substitutes were employed. These included Vulcanite or hard rubber, dyed horn, black celluloid, onyx, the dark variety of tortoiseshell, and black enamel.

Picture 9 shows an interesting if somewhat sombre example of a mid Victorian hard rubber hair accessory. This may well have been worn for mourning because of its dull matte appearance. Its large size and mantilla style outline shows that it probably dates from the mid to late 1870s or early 1880s. The comb made from Vulcanite or hard rubber, and is moulded from one large piece of this material. The upstanding coronet effect is typical.

Vulcanisation is the process of adding sulphur to rubber to harden it. Various ratios of sulphur added to rubber, among other chemical additives, results in rubber products with different characteristics.

The vulcanisation of natural rubber with sulphur was discovered by Charles Goodyear in the USA about 1839 and was patented by Hancock in England in May 1843 and Goodyear in USA in June. Patents for hard rubber (vulcanite) were granted to Hancock in England in 1843 and to Nelson Goodyear (brother of Charles) in USA in 1851. Mouldings in vulcanite (hard rubber) were exhibited by both Hancock and Goodyear at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The material is most commonly black in colour and has been used to make not only combs, but also buttons, jewellery, fountain pens, pipe stems (both plain and decorative), musical instruments, etc.

As well as hair accessories, jet ornaments of all kinds were worn by widows who had passed the first stage of their mourning. However, most of the so called "jet" hair ornaments were made from a substitute called French jet. This was a glittering form of black glass, imported in quantities from what is now the modern Czech Republic (then called Bohemia) and a very different substance from genuine Whitby jet.

Picture 10: French jet mantilla style hair comb

Picture 10 is an unusual example of a very large mantilla style hair comb done entirely in French jet. It has a beautiful scalloped outline and a delicate pattern which is fine enough to resemble black lace. One of the hallmarks of good quality French jet ornaments is that different sizes and shapes of the material are used in the same object. This lovely comb includes not only roundels in three sizes but also hexagons, lozenges, and ovals.

In a typical French jet piece each jewel is separately faceted and then riveted to a metal framework which is itself enamelled black. This ornamental heading is usually attached to a comb mount of black celluloid or dyed horn.

In the final quarter of the 19th century both fashions and hair styles gradually became simpler and less voluminous. The very large mantilla style combs fell out of favour, only to return with the Art Deco period of the 1920s.

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:

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 while 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.