



LETTET PEARL (1884)



Victorian Combs & Hair Accessories

1880 - 1890

Paris Fashions

The fashionable silhouette went through many changes during this period. Picture 1 shows the Paris fashions of 1887. We can see that all traces of the crinoline and the curious backwards projecting bustle which followed it have disappeared. The mode now favours a long bodice line which smoothes the hips, and all the elaboration is concentrated upon the skirt.



Picture 1: Paris fashions of 1887

During the 1880s the use of false hair gradually decreased, although hairstyles remained complex by today's standards. Picture 2 is taken from a plate in a fashion magazine from the same period, and shows the mode in hairdressing and hair accessories for the late 1880s. Although mantilla styles persisted for a few years, fashionable hair combs were definitely growing smaller and simpler. A reaction had set in against the heavy ornate ornaments which had been used for the last 20 years.



Picture 2: Hairdressing and hair combs, fashion plate late 1880s

One gemstone which we now think of as quintessentially Victorian is the deep blood red garnet. The word garnet is believed to have come from the Latin *granatus*, for pomegranate. Although there are different colours and kinds of garnets, the type which we associate with the Victorians, and which reached the peak of its popularity during this period, was the so-called Bohemian garnet.

Bohemia is the area of Europe which is now part of the Czech Republic and was celebrated for its jewellery industry. These stones, which have a deep vibrant blood red colour, were imported into Britain and the USA in great quantities. They were used in small hinged combs and generally set into silver, silver gilt (called vermeil) or low carat gold. The most popular designs featured stars, flowers or a coronet effect. The stones were claw set in layered mounts so as to create an attractive three-dimensional and closely encrusted effect such as that seen in picture 3.



Picture 3: Bohemian Garnet hair comb

This very beautiful hair comb is typical of the genre. It has two tortoiseshell tines and the heading is attached by a flexible hinge which permits it to rotate through a full 180 degrees. This means that it can easily be placed anywhere within the coiffure. The design is the usual heavily encrusted effect of circular and pearl shaped stones packed densely together to form stars and other motifs.

The Arts and Crafts Movement

In the last quarter of the 19th century we see the emergence of several artistic movements which were to exert an important influence upon later generations.

The first of these was the Arts and Crafts movement. This was an attempt to reject the mechanical and vulgar commercialism which affected the applied arts in the later half of the 19th century. Although much of the jewellery being produced was of high technical quality, it was mass produced in factories and the designs were felt by many to be debased and trivial.

Arts and Crafts practitioners idealistically attempted to return to the medieval ideal whereby an item was designed and made by the same craftsperson, using traditional techniques and hand working.

The Arts and Crafts style developed in Britain under the influence of pre Raphaelites artists such as William Morris and John Ruskin. Individual guilds of designer-craftsmen formed around the country and began making innovative, colourful hand-made articles using natural lines and forms. Some of the famous makers were those of Liberty of London (still a famous department store) and Charles Renee Mackintosh of Glasgow.

The Arts and Crafts style developed somewhat differently in the USA. There it tended to develop along ethnic lines, as in Native American, Mexican and Hispanic influences. However it was hugely influential and is nowadays widely collected. The main elements of the genre, whether in the UK or the USA can be distinguished as a concentration upon individual design and hand workmanship, and a rejection of mechanization and mass production.



Picture 4: Arts and Crafts style hair comb, 1880s

Jewellery and personal accessories made in this style are often based upon Celtic or Medieval looking forms, using silver rather than gold. The beautiful hair comb in picture 4 is a typical example. It has a base of mottled tortoiseshell with a particularly vibrant set of markings in lighter brown, orange and yellow. The coronet shaped heading utilises a combination of less expensive materials, and where gemstones are set en cabochon rather than in faceted forms. This lovely comb has a heading made from hand wrought silver, which has been fashioned into a garland of roses with their leaves. At the centre of each flower is set a cabochon amethyst.

A Taste for the Orient

Running parallel to the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain was a taste for Oriental art, spurred on by the fact that at that time there was a huge empire whose cultural resources could be exploited. In the 1880s the famous store Liberty set up in London, and began to import large numbers of artefacts from the Far East. This helped to promote what have since become known as *Chinoiserie* and *Japonaiserie*. These fancy sounding names are simply umbrella terms meaning a taste for the art of these cultures in what was a very eclectic era.

As we have seen with the so called Moorish fashion earlier in the 19th century, there was really no attempt to produce authentic looking Chinese and Japanese goods which were identical with the originals. Rather certain design elements were seized upon and reproduced within objects which were purely Western in conception.

For example the Chinese have been using elaborate lattice designs in their windows for hundreds of years. In the late 19th century we find variations of such designs reproduced in comb headings of gilded metal. An example of this type of hair accessory is shown in picture 5 which is an elaborate hinged comb in silver gilt filigree. Also hair combs carved in ivory with Oriental motifs were still popular.



Picture 5: Comb with heading design based upon Chinese lattice work

Japan had lived in complete seclusion for centuries. However in the second half of the 19th century commerce between that country and the West began to develop. This contact initiated an assimilation of Japanese styles by European artists and artisans, particularly in the areas of design.

This assimilation, referred to as *Japonisme* or *Japonaiserie*, flourished from about 1870 to 1900. It paved the way for a whole new philosophy of art and design. In England the same style was gradually submerged beneath the pseudo medievalism of the Arts and Crafts movement.

One of the ways in which *Japonisme* manifested itself was in a taste for shiny black lacquer, or lacquer like surfaces on comb headings. Japonisme also had a strong influence upon the development of the later Art Nouveau movement. This was especially marked in its use of asymmetry and the fondness for motifs taken from plants and nature, often considerably stylized.

The Art Nouveau Movement

No discussion of late 19th century hair accessories would be complete without an account of this important artistic movement which arose in the last ten years of the decade. Art Nouveau is so complex and influential a style that it really merits a separate guide to itself.

The Art Nouveau movement has its roots in the Arts and Crafts, although there were other important cultural influences which fed into it. We have seen that this earlier interest group sought to idealistically reject what they saw as the mechanical and vulgar commercialism which affected the applied arts in the late 19th century.

Some of the most beautiful and sympathetic treatments of Art Nouveau, appear in combs and hairpins. Their design is characterised by its use of various naturalistic motifs, such as flora and fauna, or by free flowing lines and organic shapes, often combined into an asymmetric design. One characteristic feature is the so-called whiplash effect of curved and interlaced lines, often combined with conventionalised scrollwork.

There are wonderful examples by the master comb makers of ladies faces with streaming hair, scrolls, grapes, flowers, starbursts, butterflies, dragonflies, peacocks, bats, snakes and even cobwebs. Winged insects such as butterflies, moths and dragonflies lend themselves well to Art Nouveau stylisation. Another popular motif was the peacock, because of the beauty of the male bird's unfurled tail during the courting period.

The Work of Rene Lalique

Although there were many accomplished jewellers working in the Art Nouveau style, one name, that of Rene Lalique, stands head and shoulders above them all.

The very beautiful tiara comb shown in picture 6 is an excellent example of his work. The body of this beautiful comb consists of two orchids. One is hand carved in horn and the other in ivory. A small drop-shaped topaz appears in the centre of the ivory flower. The three-pronged comb mount is also in horn and connected to the diadem by a gold hinge. The exotic orchid was one of the flowers that symbolised the aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century. Art Nouveau jewellers handled the subject with great realism, which is heightened in this case by Lalique's technical mastery. He started from the real flower yet managed to imbue it simultaneously with elegance and a powerful erotic charge.



Picture 6: Art Nouveau orchid comb by René Lalique

Lalique is particularly noted for his innovative use of horn, as well as other intrinsically cheap materials. He first exhibited a bracelet made of horn at the 1896 Salon. Following its success, he continued to produce jewels in horn and ivory during the following years. Horn was a great favourite of the art nouveau jewellery because it was so versatile. It could be carved into delicate shapes to resemble fruits, flowers, the wings or insects or even dead leaves and foliage.

By the 1890s Lalique had opened his own workshop in Paris and become one of the most admired jewellers of the day. His jewellery was unique, unlike anything that had gone before it. To begin with, his work gained notoriety due to his use of flowing and majestic plants, animal and human forms. In addition, he created a stir because his designs avoided using precious stones and the conservatively classical settings favoured by other leading jewellers of the time. Rather, he combined semiprecious stones with such materials as enamel, horn, ivory, coral, rock crystal, and irregularly shaped Baroque pearls in settings of organic inspiration, frequently accentuated by asymmetrical curves or elaborate flourishes.

Lalique's jewellery eventually attracted international attention, and the actress Sarah Bernhardt was among his many notable clients. In 1900, René Lalique exhibited his innovative jewellery at the Paris *Exposition Universelle*, attracting large crowds and creating a great demand for his work. But after achieving the pinnacle of success in this field, Lalique subsequently refocused his artistic talents on another medium: glass.

Art Nouveau and mass production

Influential and beautiful as it was, the hair jewels and accessories produced in the Art Nouveau mode inevitably contained the seeds of their own destruction. The ideal had been to move away from mass production. It is ironic that being bespoke, one off pieces, they were far too expensive for ordinary people.

However as the Art Nouveau style gained in popularity, a whole class of popular jewellery was mass manufactured which reproduced the typical motifs of the genre. The beautifully crafted horn combs were quickly followed by mass produced versions made in celluloid and other synthetics for the popular market. Although some of these hair accessories appear very pretty and unusual by today's standards, there is no comparison between these cheaper versions and those of a master.



Picture 7: mass produced Art Nouveau style comb circa 1890s

Picture 7 is an example of one of these mass produced hair combs which is derived from the Art Nouveau genre. This is a large curved back comb in celluloid faux tortoiseshell. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries many of the hair accessories on sale which appear to be tortoiseshell are, in fact, made from synthetics.

The quality of these celluloid combs varies. Some are thin and flexible, being cheaply made. Others, like this example, are of sturdy construction. The reproduction of the characteristic tortoiseshell mottling also varies. In some examples it is clumsily done, with no attempt at realism. In others it is so cunningly contrived that other tests are necessary to determine a celluloid comb from one made in genuine tortoiseshell.

This pretty comb is made as a back comb, and is deeply curved to fit the back skull comfortably. Backcombs of this kind, often in sets, were employed to support the padded pompadour hairdressing and the huge elaborate hats of the period. Although the celluloid comb base in this example has been cut and pressed out in a factory the intricacy of the design shows it to have been hand finished. There are three panels of applied decoration in several shades of gold. These are filled in with flower forms which can be seen as a watered down version of the organic naturalism of Art Nouveau treatments.



Picture 8: Contemporary photograph 1895 showing fashionable backcombs to support hair and hat

The hairstyles at the end of the 19th century were characterised by an appearance of soft fullness. The hair was dressed out over pads of false hair to give it body, and drawn up to the crown of the head in a chignon. One popular fashion was known as the pompadour, after the famous courtesan and mistress of Louis XV of France.

This distinctive puffed out style has become familiar from the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson. It was supported at the back of the head and sometimes at the sides as well by wide hair combs or barrettes, which might be as plain or as fancy as the wearer desired.

These combs also helped to support the huge hats of the late Victorian and Edwardian period, as illustrated in the contemporary photograph in picture 8 which is dated 1895. Here the sitter has no fewer than three matching combs, done in the Art Nouveau taste, to support her padded updo and large hat. Not content with that, she has another wide comb placed at the nape to hold the stray hairs in place.

More Conservative styles

Alongside the exotic jewels of the Art Nouveau expression there also existed a whole class of jewellery which was worn by women who were more conservative in their tastes. Such women wished to own beautiful ornaments, but considered it rather vulgar to be too modish. At this time many rich American women bought their clothes in Paris. However they laid them away until the next season because they did not wish to appear *nouveau riche*.

Such ladies they preferred to follow fashion at a distance rather than to be in the extreme of the mode. Although this range of jewellery often shows the influence of popular stylistic movements such as Art Nouveau it was not produced in the manner of any one particular influence. Rather we find designs which were described as "neo classical" or "Etruscan" but had little to do with ancient art. This is yet another example of how designers plundered the past of a few motifs and then watered down the designs to fit a modern clientele.

These ornaments tend to be small, light and more delicate, in tune with the simpler hairstyles which were in fashion at the close of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The dominant idea in precious jewellery at this time was to concentrate attention upon the beauty of the gemstones, rather than upon the settings. The result is that settings in primary jewellery, which made from diamonds and precious metals, became ever more delicate and lace-like with simpler settings. Popular jewellery followed this trend.



Picture 9: Hair comb in horn, pearls and diamonds, late 19th century

Picture 9 is an excellent example of this more restrained but nevertheless elegant style in hair accessories and jewellery. This is a tiara comb, with the horn teeth set at right angles to the crown like heading. The delicate lacy openwork heading, with its latticework gallery and series of arches is entirely typical of the period. The comb is of closely set diamonds interspersed with small spherical pearls. A large pearl cabochon occupies the important centre front position.

Notice also that this beautiful ornament is made entirely in colourless materials. By the turn of the 20th century strongly coloured materials had gone out of fashion. Diamonds, pearls, and their substitutes, were definitely the stones of choice.

Of course diamond ornaments like this were not worn during the daytime. Nor could all women afford to wear such splendid hair accessories. Our last illustration of Victorian hair combs, picture 10, gives us a more realistic idea of what ordinary women were actually wearing in the late 19th century. This comes from a delightful cabinet picture of three young American ladies, all of whom are wearing hair combs in their up-dos.



Picture 10: Cabinet photo of three American ladies wearing small combs, circa 1895

We can date this picture to about 1895 by the fashionable sleeves that the young woman at the back is wearing. These were popularly known as *gigot* or leg-o-mutton sleeves because of their distinctive shape. They were high fashion in the mid 1890s but by 1900 had become smoothly set in at the shoulder again.

We can see that the hair was now worn in a simple chignon. All three sitters wear a very small hair pick or pin, which is light and delicate in appearance. The standing lady has a version with five balls set on upstanding spikes. This was known as a *Galatea* and was a favourite design of the 1890s. The lady on the left appears to have a comb of pierced openwork metal, while her companion on the right has an asymmetric design done in dark shell.

What this picture shows is that while there was still variety in design and materials, the fashionable hair accessories had become much smaller and more delicate, in tune with the simpler hairstyles and fashion outline. Another feature to notice is that although the three ladies have all chosen ornaments of differing styles and materials they are all worn in a similar way. The comb is now placed with the heading standing proud of the crown by several inches, so that the delicacy of the design can be seen from all angles.

This upstanding tendency was to become an important feature in hair accessories during the following decade, that of the Edwardian period which lasted from 1900-1910. This will be the subject of another guide.

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 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.