

**THE TITANIC BUTTERFLY  
REPLICA HAIR COMB**



## Introduction

The Titanic sank beneath the icy Atlantic exactly 100 years ago. Yet the legend of the doomed liner remains today as haunting and compelling as ever.

In 1997 James Cameron produced a fictional account of this famous event. The film takes the form of an epic romance, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Jack Dawson and Kate Winslet as Rose DeWitt Bukater. Jack and Rose are members of different social classes who fall in love aboard the liner during its ill fated maiden voyage.

In his film wanted to convey the emotional message of the tragedy, using the vehicle of a love story interspersed with human loss. Against the backdrop of the luxurious liner with its petty snobberies and strict divisions of class, the tragic love story of Rose and Jack is played out.



Illus 1: The Flying Scene

The movie is renowned for its lavish costumes and interiors, and for a number of iconic scenes. One of these is the famous “flying” scene where Rose stands with her feet on the railings at the bough of the ship. Jack clasps her waist from behind, and Rose stands with her arms outstretched, imagining herself to be completely free from the physical and social constraints imposed upon her. She calls out to Jack that “It’s like flying!”

It is in this scene that Rose wears the iconic Art Nouveau style butterfly hair comb, which has become one of the most sought after pieces of Titanic memorabilia.

## The Titanic as a Microcosm of the Edwardian World

Edwardian Era cannot be precisely isolated to the period of King Edward VII's short reign (1901-1910). In terms of customs and society the term Edwardian may be taken to mean the period which encompasses the mid 1890s to the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914. The Titanic era is 1912.

What is amazing about Titanic is the array of passengers who travelled on her. She was a floating town, carrying passenger representatives from each **strictly divided class** along with valets, maids, nannies, kitchen staff, stewards, engine crew and officers. The Titanic passenger list ranged from the richest people in the world to the poorest, setting out to make a new life in America. It is perhaps the range of people on board with a wide range of reasons for travel which makes the ship's story so fascinating.

The class system which existed at the time ensured that these different social castes neither met nor mixed while on board, except perhaps during the very last minutes of Titanic's life. It is nowadays hard for us to imagine these rigid barriers between the classes which existed in late Edwardian times and the early reign of George V and Queen Mary.

Because of the image of apparent splendour and excess this period has been represented as a lost "golden age" which was abruptly brought to an end by the outbreak of World War I. In reality, the golden age belonged only to Edwardian High Society, where wealth, birth and manners were the prime qualifications for commanding respect and obedience from others. High Society resembled a club, and the image was reinforced by a laborious set of rules and formalities which served to emphasise the distance between those in Society and those outside it.

### **Dressing for Dinner in the Titanic Era**

The early years of the 1910s were an era of transition in fashion for women. As the Victorian era waned women's silhouettes shifted from the voluptuous S-bend (small waists, large bosoms, and curved rears) to a straighter, lighter line that seemed more natural and modern to contemporaries. Beginning in 1908, designer Paul Poiret led this new look which featured narrower bodices, slim skirts, and raised waistlines.



Illus 2: Fashion Plate Showing Evening Dresses for 1912

Inspired by the Ballets Russes, designers infused the new look with an Orientalist aesthetic. Evening dresses were made of delicate, sheer fabrics embellished with beads, lace, or other trimmings that floated over a silk under layer. The general outline for an evening dress would be an under dress and tunic effect (matching bodice and overskirt). Bodices featured short sleeves, and waistlines could be placed anywhere between just under of the bust line and the natural waist. The waistline itself was loose and softly defined with a sash or belt. Most dresses included two skirts, one “tunic” skirt that matched the bodice that usually ended between the low hip and the knees, and one ankle-length trained underskirt. The underskirt was generally slim, with the tunic overskirt comparatively fuller.



Illus 3: Jack Greets Rose Before dinner

The evening dress worn by Rose for the famous set piece dinner scene in the film Titanic is shown in illustration 3. As a reward for saving her life, Jack has been invited to dine with the first class passengers. One of these, the famous “unsinkable” Molly Brown, takes him under her wing and lends him a tuxedo so that he can cut a suitably fine figure among all these snobbish folks. Molly is a real historical character who actually travelled on the Titanic and survived the sinking. She was an American millionaire of humble origins who used her vast wealth to buy her way into society. However she was never really accepted by some of its most snobbish members.

The gown worn by Rose is typical of the era. It is a diaphanous dark blue transparent net over an under tunic. The skirt has asymmetric bands of lace and embroidery superimposed upon it. The bodice too is heavily beaded.

Evening gowns were made in light and/or sheer fabrics for the tunic layer, with a solid light- to medium-weight fabric for the underskirt. However, the new influence of orientalism introduced stronger colours like black, royal blue, and emerald. Evening dresses generally had some focal visual element such as pleating, asymmetrical draping, beading, embroidery, or brocade fabric. Additionally, lace insets, lace trim, and fringe were used as trim. Decorations were often placed asymmetrically.

## **The Edwardian Unmarried Girl**

The chief business of the upper class girl was to find a suitable (and preferably wealthy) husband of her own class and to combine the duties of wife and mother with being a society hostess. Of course she would have had an army of nannies and servants to assist her in looking after her children and running the household. Until she married a girl was expected to remain innocent and virginal. Once married of course, she could be eyed thoughtfully, by both single and married men.

An important rite of passage for the Edwardian upper class girl was that of “coming out” which usually took place at the age of 17 or 18. The landmarks of this process were being presented at the British court and attending a “coming out” dance. Throughout the season the debutantes danced the nights away and spent the days shopping for clothes, attending garden parties and calling on acquaintances. Within months many were married and found themselves playing the role of society hostess.

A girl signalled that she was ready for marriage and the social round by using a series of signs and symbols. One of these was putting up her hair. Loose uncut hair was seen as a symbol of both virginity and promiscuity. The girl in Edwardian England put up her hair and lengthened her skirts to signify that she had reached maturity was symbolically ready for the marriage market. Once she married it is doubtful that Rose would have been seen in public with her hair hanging loose like a young girl. However on informal occasions she might have had it neatly tied back in a bow or clasp.



Illus 4 Hairdressing in the Titanic era

Here we see some examples of fashionable hairdressing in the late Edwardian era. The hair is waved with hot irons and given an appearance of soft puffy fullness by being dressed over pads. These were often supplemented by false pieces, known as postiches, in order to produce the required bulk.

We can see that for evening dress a variety of hair accessories might be worn. Jewelled bandeaux are worn by two of the models, together with high upstanding plumes called aigrettes. The two other models shown in this fashion plate are either wearing decorative combs or hairpins. Combs remained one of the favourite hair accessories well into the 1920s.

### **The Art Nouveau style**

The famous butterfly comb worn by Rose in the “flying” scene is a typical design of the period. It is made in a style called Art Nouveau which was an important art movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Art Nouveau lasted from approximately 1895 to 1910. It began in the late 19th century as a reaction against the great quantities of jewellery and personal items which were being stamped out by machine. Early Art Nouveau jewellery and hair ornaments were hand made by artist-craftspeople. However as the taste for these designs percolated down the social strata a range of mass produced ornaments appeared. These were manufactured in celluloid and other synthetics, although many of these were hand finished and tinted.

As a design genre, Art Nouveau is characterised by the use of various naturalistic motifs, such as flora and fauna, or by free flowing lines and organic shapes, often combined into an asymmetric design.

The Art Nouveau movement has its roots in an earlier style called Arts and Crafts, although there were other important cultural influences which fed into it. 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.



Illus 5: Art Nouveau butterfly jewel

Butterflies, dragonflies and bees mounted with diamonds and coloured precious or semi-precious stones were the craze of the 1890's 'fin de siècle' jewels and hair accessories. They appropriate motifs for Art Nouveau master craftsmen to produce such insects with translucent wings using a difficult but beautiful enamel technique called *plique-à-jour*.

**Plique-à-jour** (French for "letting in daylight") is a vitreous enamelling technique where the enamel is applied in cells, similar to *cloisonné*, but with no backing in the final product, so light can shine through the transparent or translucent enamel. It is in effect a miniature version of stained-glass and is considered very challenging technically. The technique is similar to that of *cloisonné*, but using a temporary backing that after firing is dissolved by acid or rubbed away. **Plique-à-jour** was a technique much favoured by Rene Lalique, today recognized as one of France's foremost Art Nouveau jewellery designers. Lalique created innovative pieces of jewellery and his name synonymous with creativity, beauty and quality.

## **Rose's Movie Prop Comb**

The tortoiseshell hair comb worn by Kate Winslett in the film was a genuine Edwardian artefact along with many other props used by her in the film. Unfortunately when the props were exported from Britain to Mexico, where filming took place, the agent forgot to obtain an endangered shipping certificate which would have allowed them to be imported back into the country. Because of this error more than 30 items made from tortoiseshell, ivory and other endangered species were confiscated by customs when they were being brought back into the country. (Independent, 28/12/98)

Two versions of the original movie prop are used in the film. One is the perfect version worn by a young Rose during her encounter on the deck with Jack. The second is the damaged version rescued from the wreck of the Titanic, and which we see an old Rose holding in the film. We must recall that the original comb was decorated with enamel, which is a form of vitrified glass. In the retrieved version the hitherto translucent enamel of the butterfly wings has become opaque and dulled by the action of water. We have only to think of the colour and consistency of sea glass routinely washed up on shorelines to appreciate the work that went to make this prop look authentic.



Illus 6: Rose's Perfect Comb



Illus 7: Rose Holds the Damaged Comb Retrieved from the Wreck

There are some significant differences between these two movie props and the authorised Peterman version of the comb, which is so much prized by collectors. Chief of these is that in the movie prop the feelers of the insect stand up proud. In the Peterman however, they are spread outwards so that they almost join with the wings.

### **The “Peterman” Butterfly Comb Version**

The butterfly comb made by J. Peterman Company is an authorized replica of the original movie prop used in Titanic, as worn by Kate Winslet as Rose DeWitt Bukater. This is the only Titanic butterfly hair comb' authorized for sale by 20th

Century Fox. The comb is stamped on the reverse with a '1998 Fox' stamp of authenticity; it comes in its own presentation box and even includes a 'Certificate of Authenticity' from 20th Century Fox.

This beautiful but hard-to-find collectible was about to be sold to the public, when the company filed for bankruptcy. The amount of existing Peterman butterfly combs made is only a fraction of the thousands of Peterman Heart of the Ocean necklaces sold, making it a very rare and sought-after item.

The butterfly motif mounted upon the comb is of brass oxidised plating. It has Tiffany-like translucent wings made from black, sea green and milky transparent epoxy simulating plique-à-jour. The butterfly body is accented with an aventurine cabochon and a black faceted stone. Aventurine is translucent greenish quartz mineral that is internally granular. It is often mistaken for jade, a valuable stone of green. A cabochon is a domed gemstone which has a highly polished curved surface without faceting. The ornament is beautifully finished with a plastic simulated tortoise comb.

*Illustrations 8 and 9 show the back and front views of the Peterman comb*



Illus 8: Peterman version front



Illus 9: Peterman version back

Notice that in this version, the comb has ten tines. All other versions of the butterfly comb have fewer tines, usually seven, and this is their main distinguishing feature. The comb mount of the Peterman was probably custom made. Other versions utilise what appears to be a standard blank, or one cut down from a larger version. Another point to notice is that in the Peterman the feelers of the insect are spread out so that they are joining the wings. The wings of the Peterman butterfly are also slightly narrower and flatter than the replicas.

### **Other Versions of the Titanic Butterfly Comb**

In response to demand by collectors of both Titanic memorabilia and lovers of hair combs for the scarce Peterman version, other less expensive replicas of the butterfly comb have been appeared.

One version was produced in the USA by J.Bailly of the Titanic Jewelry Store. This version is shown in illustrations 10 and 11. It has seven tines unlike the ten of the Peterman. This is because it is mounted upon a standard faux tortoiseshell comb blank, or possibly one which has been cut down from a larger blank. Running my fingers down the sides of the comb mount I can discern sharp edges which have not been finished.

The back part of the metal butterfly has not been polished, and instead is left dull where it shows. Of course this part of the comb would be completely invisible when in wear. However, if you examine a genuine Art Nouveau hair comb of the period it is

usually beautifully finished on the back side, if less ornamental. This is one of the most important signs which distinguish antique jewellery from modern copies.

I have noted, the feelers are outspread to ape those in the Peterman, and quite unlike the original movie prop. Other differences from the Peterman are the enamel colours in the wings. The Peterman has opaque black enamel at the edges but those in the J. Bailly comb show up as midnight blue against the light.



Illus 10: J Bailly butterfly comb front



Illus 11: J Bailly butterfly comb back

There are also marked differences in the treatment of the insect's body. The semi translucent aventurine stone in the Peterman has been replaced in the Bailly by a dark green glass opaque cabochon. The black cabochon in the Peterman has been substituted by a circle of black enamel in this less expensive version.

More recently a third version of the butterfly comb, designed and produced in China, has emerged and is currently being sold on Ebay and other outlets. For this version of the comb the designer, Justin Quinn, went back to the original movie prop as worn by Rose in the film.



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Illus 12: J Quinn comb working drawing

When we refer to Quinn's notes and working diagrams we see that he was determined to go back to the actual movie for inspiration, rather than the Peterman version. So this designer is looking at the actual prop worn in the film, rather than a copy of the comb worn by Rose. In his notes showing how the design was drafted, Quinn makes it clear that this original was the source of his inspiration.

We can see that in this latest version the butterfly feelers, like those of Rose's original ornament, stand up proud from the head of the creature. So in this sense at least the comb is a more faithful replica of the film prop than either the Peterman or the J Bailly. The back of the comb is also much more carefully and fully finished than in the J Bailly version. The general appearance is slicker and shinier.



Illus 13: J Quinn comb front



Illus 14: J Quinn comb back

The final illustration shows the beautiful enamel colours of the wings in the Justin Quinn comb. We can see that they more closely resemble the J Bailly than the Peterman, which has black opaque edges to the wings. Here we see midnight blue combined with a beautiful sea green and a dull cloudy jade green in the extreme centre.

This comb comes in a specially designed Titanic presentation box with black satin lining and outer sleeve.



Illus 15: J Bailly and Quinn combs side by side

Bearing in mind the current scarcity of the Peterman version, these later and less expensive versions should not be regarded as cheap copies, as they are by some purists. I have tried to show here that each version of the butterfly comb has its own

distinct personality and characteristics. Each comb is a lovely collectable in its own right.



Illus 16: Three Justin Quinn Combs

The Justin Quinn version is available from my website at:-

[www.simitras-exquisite-things.com](http://www.simitras-exquisite-things.com)

This comes complete in its own presentation box and sleeve with free worldwide shipping

**Enjoy your Titanic Butterfly Comb.**

Some illustrations are taken from the film "Titanic" ©1998 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox