



Hair Combs in Victorian Photographic Portraits

1860 - 1880

High Victorian Fashion

By the 1860s Queen Victoria had been on the British throne for over twenty years. This was a period of more rapid social change and increasing mechanization than had hitherto been experienced. At the beginning of the reign, articles of jewellery and personal adornment and clothing were, for the most part, hand made. By the mid century vanity items like hair combs and jewellery were being mass produced in vast numbers and endlessly varied designs, which could be ordered from catalogues. Synthetics like celluloid were fast usurping the place of natural materials like tortoiseshell, ivory and horn.

By the mid 19th century female fashion was extremely elaborate and ornate. The development of the wire cage crinoline allowed skirts to expand to a degree that had been impossible when they were supported only by starched underskirts. Fashionable gowns now required many yards of material to make them. In addition, the surface of these vast skirts was further elaborated by flounces, braids, tassels and trims of every imaginable kind.



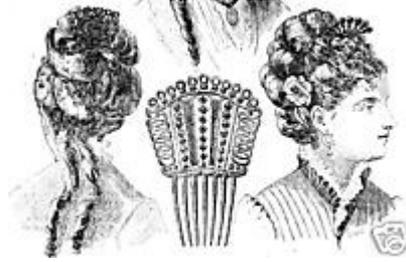
Picture 1: Ladies in outdoor dress and bonnets, cabinet photo c. mid 1860s

Jewellery too had become massive in size. A great deal of it was worn, not only in the evening, but also during the day. It was also highly ornate, in keeping with the vast size of the crinoline skirt and the popularity for heavy, brightly coloured fabrics.

Picture 1 is a cabinet photo showing two ladies in outdoor costume. We can see that they are both wearing enormous crinolines and clothes which must have been very heavy. Both have extremely elaborate bonnets which are heavily trimmed with fruit, flowers, ribbons and all manner of things. In addition the bonnet has a long lace veil hanging from the back. This could be thrown over the head to conceal the face when walking in the street, to conceal the wearer's identity. It must have been very convenient when keeping a romantic assignation! Both sitters have their bonnets set far enough back on the head to reveal the centre parted hair, which is elaborately curled and waved.

Elaborate Hairstyles and Hair Accessories

Along with the vast crinoline skirt, female hairstyles were also increasing in size and complexity. Great quantities of false hair were now used. The fashion plates of the period show us that the hair was generally drawn back into a great chignon, often with the addition of long ringlets as well. Picture 2 is taken from an engraved plate in a magazine called *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* for 1870. It shows an assortment of high mantilla style hair combs with pierced openwork to wear with such coiffures.



Picture 2: Fashion plate with large comb and complex coiffures, *Englishwomen's Domestic Magazine*, 1870

This style positively encouraged the wearing of large and important hair accessories of all kinds. By day the chignon was often held in a snood or net of wide chenille mesh, sewn with beads of coral, steel or jet. This was held in place by a large ornately decorated barrette or back comb of tortoiseshell, metal or horn. For the evening, no decoration could be too large or too elaborate, and entire matching sets of hair accessories were often worn together.

However there is often a difference between what the magazines of the period tell us was high fashion in Paris, and how people actually dressed. So did ordinary women actually wear these complex and exaggerated coiffures which required great amounts of false hair to construct? Well there are many photographic images remaining to us which show that they did!



Picture 3: Young lady wearing a *peigne Josephine* comb with balls, cabinet photo c. late 1870s

One of the most popular designs for comb headings in this high Victorian period was the so called *peigne Josephine*. This is any high backed comb which resembles those worn by the Empress Josephine, wife of Napoleon I of France.

The most recognisable feature of the *peigne Josephine* is that it is decorated along the top of the heading by a series of knobs or balls. The materials used in these balls combs were very diverse. The favourites were cut and faceted jet, tortoiseshell, coral, pearls or enamel. The better quality had a series of large semi precious stones such as cameos, amethyst, garnet, agate or carnelian. These gemstones were usually oval in shape, graduated in size, and set into ornate mountings which were placed on a raised gallery, curving upwards.

Picture 3 shows a fashionable young lady with a great fondness of one of these balls combs. Her hair is piled up into a very tall chignon, backed up by a Josephine comb. Notice that she also has a great deal of other ornaments, including drop earrings, a locket and elaborate jet embroidery on the front of her gown. This handsome cabinet portrait probably dates from the late 1870s.



Picture 4: Lady wearing a set of hair combs with French jet balls , cabinet photo c. late 1870s

These "balls" combs are one of the favourites of the mid 19th century, and an archetypal Victorian design. They were often supplied in a matched set, consisting of one large one to be worn as a tiara or back comb, with two smaller matching side combs.

The elegant older lady in picture 4 is wearing just such a handsome set. Her hair, which has a wavy texture, is drawn back from a centre parting into a plaited chignon of fairly moderate dimensions. Notice the coquettish little curls at the temples. She is wearing a large tiara style comb and side combs with balls which appear to be of faceted French jet.

This attractive material is one I shall say more about in the section on Victorian mourning. It is one of the most characteristic substances which collectors will find in mid 19th century hair combs.



Picture 5: Young girl with hinged tiara or bandeau comb, cabinet photo c. 1860s

From the mid to late 1850s decorative hair combs became more sophisticated and adaptable in certain features of their design. The heading was usually attached to a comb mount of horn by a small metal hinge, which enabled the heading to rotate. In some examples the heading will move through a full 180 degrees, permitting it to be laid out flat on a surface. The presence of this kind of hinge in any comb usually indicates a date from the middle of the 19th century onwards.

This adaptability permitted the ornament to be worn in a number of different ways. Where the heading is shaped like a coronet, it could be worn above the forehead with the heading upstanding like a mini tiara. In this situation the teeth, placed at a 90 degree angle projected backwards and were hidden by the wearer's hair.

The young lady in picture 4 is wearing one of these tiara style hair combs. She is dressed in the mode of the 1870s and appears to be aged in her mid to late teens. Her hair is not worn up, but is drawn back from her face and then left loose. This was a style considered suitable for young girls until they came out or were introduced into society. At that point it was the custom for a young woman to begin wearing her hair up. It was a public sign that she had reached womanhood and was available to be married!

This young sitter has a curved tiara comb with an openwork gallery and a faceted design. It is not possible to tell whether the comb is of metal or some other material. By this time combs of this type were being mass produced in synthetic materials like celluloid, as well as in hard rubber or Vulcanite. What we can see is that at the point where the upstanding crest finishes the comb has extremities which encircle the head like a bandeau. Not surprisingly such combs were called bandeau combs.



Picture 6: Sitters with elaborate hair dressing, CDV 1860s and 1870s

Picture 6 is taken from a trio of cabinet photos and depicts three elegant ladies of the late 1860s and 1870s.

The sitter on the extreme left has a typical coiffure of the 1860s, with its characteristic fall of ringlets in back. Her head is encircled by a thick plait which may be false.

The sitter on the right is a mature lady who is wearing her back hair down and spread on her shoulders. This was highly fashionable in the mid 1870s but somewhat controversial. Respectable women were expected to wear their hair neatly in an updo.

The lady in the centre has a pretty coiffure with the hair drawn back into a curled chignon. She is wearing an upstanding comb of moderate dimensions inserted between her skull and the chignon. This is a characteristic way of wearing a hair comb.

Spanish Mantilla Style Hair Combs

The high comb Spanish style comb became popular 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 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 *Peineta*, 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 *Peineta* is particularly associated with the region of southern Spain known as Andalusia.



PICTURE 7: Young lady with mantilla style comb of pierced horn, CDV c. 1870s

Picture 7 is a portrayal of how a lady wearing one of these Spanish style combs would have appeared. It is taken from a CDV of the mid to late 1870s and shows a very fashionable young lady in the dress of the day. She is wearing a high mantilla style comb with an elaborate pierced openwork design in her complex updo. Notice how extremely elaborate and voluminous her hairdressing is. She has a huge cable plait over which her front hair is draped in two wings. This plait is almost certainly false since it appears to be a much coarser texture than the rest of her hair, which falls loose onto her shoulders.

This hanging down of the back hair was called a *depeignee* (uncombed) style, from the French verb *peigner*, to comb. It was considered suitable for younger women and girls. However in the 1870s it became the fashion for more mature women to wear their hair loose in this manner. The fashion journals of the day deplored it as poor taste for a respectable older woman to wear her hair loose and uncombed in this fashion.

The fashion journals of the 1870s also tell 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. The comb worn by the fashionable young sitter in picture 6 is beautifully pierced into an openwork pattern with a scalloped profile. It is also semi translucent since the light can be seen through it. It is almost certainly made from horn.



Picture 8: Plaited chignon with mantilla style back comb and French jet flower hairpins, cabinet photo c. 1870s

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 portion 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 of ornamental combs.

Horn was one of the most popular materials for hair combs throughout the 19th century. The material was cheap and easily obtained as a by-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.



Picture 9: Exaggerated chignon with high mantilla style comb and bandeau ornament, cabinet photo c. late 1870s

The examples in pictures 7- 9 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.

Pictures 8 and 9 are more variations of fashionable sitters with high elaborate coiffures and complex jewellery and ornaments.

Picture 8 has her hair drawn back tightly from a centre parting and coiled into a high plaited chignon. This is almost certainly augmented with artificial hair to increase the volume. She has a high mantilla style comb with an openwork design and a scalloped top profile. As she is also wearing a large number of other ornaments in French net, not only hairpins but also an elaborate brooch and necklace, we can speculate that the part of her comb which we cannot see may also be decorated with faceted cabochons of this material.

Picture 9 is wearing a plaited chignon of such exaggerated height that it resembles a 1970s beehive hairdo of the type which I loved to wear as a teenager! Again this is almost certainly padded out with artificial hair. It is backed up by a very high mantilla style comb with a scalloped top, whose outline we can just see peeping over the top. Not content with one hair accessory, she also has a very beautiful bandeau type ornament set across the front in the

manner of a tiara. This is made up of three lozenge shaped panels with faceted cabochons of some material placed within an ornamental setting.

Victorian Mourning

Our last section in this discussion is devoted to a discussion of Victorian mourning ornaments.

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.

In these circumstances only the most sombre jewels could be worn, such as those in 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.

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: Young lady with French jet hairpins and jewellery, cabinet photo, c. 1860s

Picture 10 is a contemporary cabinet photograph of a lady who is wearing a great deal of French jet jewellery, including hair accessories. Her dress and hair style indicates a date in the late 1860s.

She is probably a daughter who is gradually coming out of mourning for a parent, or possibly a wealthy young widow who has slighted her mourning. She has a typically elaborate high Victorian coiffure with a chignon and dangling ringlets.

Her hairpins are typical of those made in French jet in the mid to late Victorian periods. They take the form of daisy or marguerite like flowers whose petals are made up of polished and faceted French jet pieces. Each piece was welded to a metal back plate which was covered with black lacquer. Such hairpins usually have an articulated hinge and are often found in pairs or sets. Similar hairpins are worn by the older lady in picture 8, who has inserted them into her plaited chignon. Finally if we glance back at the sitter in picture 4 it will be remembered that she is wearing a handsome set of combs with balls of faceted French jet.

Both genuine and French jet was widely used for making other forms of jewellery. The sitter in picture 8 was obviously fond of this material for she has an entire suite of ornaments all made in the form of star like flowers. In addition to drop earrings she had a brooch at the neckline of her dress and a necklace with pendants of the same.

The young lady in illustration 10 also wears a quantity of other jet ornaments. She has earrings and a small brooch at her collar, which looks like the type that is decorated in black enamel and often contains the hair of someone who has passed over. Around her neck is an extremely elaborate necklace which is made up of articulated links and festooned with long drops of cut and faceted French jet.

During the 1880s the use of false hair gradually decreased, although hairstyles remained complex by today's standards. 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. However the custom of mourning continued to be observed as strictly as ever and a great deal of heavy jet jewellery continued to be worn.

Photograph types

Daguerreotypes were invented in 1837 by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and revealed to the world in 1839. Daguerreotypes are widely regarded as the most detailed and the most beautiful of all photographs. In the United States and the rest of Europe, however, the new technology, unhindered by patent law, spread rapidly. Within a few years, thousands of photographers had set up studios throughout the United States. The popularity of the Daguerreotype began to wane within about fifteen years, for reasons that included, among others, the expense of the silver-plating, the use of mercury in the process, exposure times of at least thirty seconds, and their inability to be reproduced (they are direct positives, so there is no negative to make reproductions), so as other processes were invented, photographers began to use the newer technologies. Daguerreotypes were essentially no longer commercially produced by about 1860.

The Ambrotype was patented in the United States by James Ambrose Cutting in 1854, making them easier to see; and of being easily reproduced. They quickly became popular with sitters and photographers alike.

tintypes (although tin was not used), ferrotypes became the most popular process by 1860, largely because they were cheaper. Another advantage to the tintype was its versatility of shape and its durability. Tintypes could be more easily cut into unusual shapes and sizes, were more difficult to damage, did not require sealing behind glass, and could be cased in paper sleeves to fit into the newly popular photograph albums

In about 1860, the carte-de-visite (CDV), a paper albumen photo mounted on a 4.5 x 2.5 -inch piece of cardstock, became very popular in the US, but their popularity waned shortly after the war to be supplanted by the cabinet photo (AKA cabinet card), which was essentially a bigger (6.75 x 4.5 inches) version of the same, albeit on thicker and more ornately trimmed cardstock.

In vintage photography the most misused terms are CDV and cabinet card photos. A CDV is always approximately 2.5 by 4" by its very nature from its name, Carte de Visite, meaning visiting card and thus the size. The CDV was followed by and overlapped in popularity by the cabinet card photo. The cabinet card is always 4 by 6". And both the CDV and the cabinet cards are albumen photographs laid on the cards. A CDV cannot be a cabinet card and a cabinet card cannot be a CDV by the very nature of the terms. And cabinet cards first came into use around 1866 which means that no cabinet card photograph is of Civil War vintage.

Portraits

Portrait painting is a genre in painting, where the intent is to depict the visual appearance of the subject, most often a person. A well executed portrait is expected to show the inner essence of the subject (from the artist's point of view, of course) not just a physical likeness.

Portrait photography (also known as portraiture) is the capture by means of photography of the likeness of a person or a small group of people, in which the face and its expression is predominant. The objective is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person. Like other types of portraiture, the focus of the photograph is the person's face, although the entire body and the background may be included. A portrait is generally not a snapshot, but a composed image of a person in a still position. A portrait often shows a person looking directly at the camera.

Unlike many other styles of photography, the subjects of portrait photography are non-professional models. Many family portraits and photographs that commemorate special occasions, such as graduations or weddings, are professionally produced and hang in private homes. Most portraits are not intended for public exhibition.

Portrait photography has been around since the invention and popularization of the camera. It

is a cheaper and often more accessible method than portrait painting, which has been used by distinguished figures before the popularity of the camera.

The relatively low cost of the daguerreotype in the middle of the 19th century led to its popularity for portraiture. Studios sprang up in cities around the world, some cranking out more than 500 plates a day. The style of these early works reflected the technical challenges associated with 30-second exposure times and the painterly aesthetic of the time. Subjects were generally seated against plain backgrounds and lit with the soft light of an overhead window and whatever else could be reflected with mirrors. As the equipment became more advanced, the ability to capture images with short exposure times gave photographers more creative freedom and thus created new styles of portrait photography.