



**Hair Combs in Victorian  
Photographic Portraits  
1880 - 1900**

# Late Victorian Fashion

The fashionable silhouette went through many changes during the last 20 years of the 19th century.

Picture 1 shows a very fashionable lady in the mode of the early 1880s. We can see that there is still some trace of the curious backwards projecting bustle in the rear drapery of her skirt, although this is much reduced. The mode now favours a long bodice line which smoothes the hips, and all the elaboration is concentrated upon the skirt. In particular the decoration is concentrated upon the train of the gown and the flounces which edge the skirt.



Picture 1: Lady in fashionable gown and high mantilla comb, cabinet photo c 1880

We can see that the sitter here still favours a high elaborate hairdressing with an even higher mantilla style hair comb with its pierced openwork decoration. The mass of curls upon here forehead is a style typical of the last quarter of the 19th century. During the 1880s the use of use of false hair gradually decreased, although hairstyles remained complex by today's standards. The elaboration of her hairdressing is balanced by long drop earrings.



Picture 2: Fashionable hairdressing and hair combs, engraved fashion plate early 1880s

Picture 2 is taken from a plate in a fashion magazine from the same period, and shows the fashionable 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. The fashionable hair accessories were now combs and barrettes made from tortoiseshell and horn, and, increasingly, synthetic materials like celluloid.

## The Arts and Crafts Movement

In the last quarter of the 19th century we see the emergency 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 attempted to return to the medieval ideal whereby an item was designed and made by the same craftsman, 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 3: Arts and Crafts influence bandeau or tiara comb, picture postcard late 19th century

Jewellery and personal accessories made in this style are often based upon Celtic or Medieval looking forms, using silver rather than gold. The sitter in picture 3 has a romantic flowing hairstyle and a hair ornament which might be either a tiara type hair comb with a hinge or a barrette. The salient point here is the nature of the design which shows clear Arts and Crafts influence in the free flowing lines and hand made appearance.

## 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 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.

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. Lalique is particularly noted for his innovative use of horn, as well as other intrinsically cheap materials. 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.

Lalique's 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.

The influence of Lalique and other prominent French Art Nouveau jewellers spread rapidly. So much so that 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.



**Picture 4: Set of Art nouveau combs used to support hat, contemporary photograph 1985**

The lady wearing the extremely large and elaborate hat in picture 4 has a matching set of three beautiful Art Nouveau hair combs which depict some salient features. The curvilinear whiplash design is very organic, and is typical of the period. So too is the use of large cabochon stones rather than faceted ones. Cabochons are jewels which are presented in the round, rather than being cut into facets as is usual in jewellery. Favourite cabochons found in Art Nouveau jewellery are coral, turquoise matrix, baroque pearls, opals and mother of pearl.

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.



Picture 5: *Plique a jour* bird comb

Since the delicacy and beauty of Art Nouveau hair combs do not show to greatest advantage in contemporary photographic sources I have included a fine example in picture 5. This beautiful ornament takes the form of an enamel bird set upon a gold hinge which attaches it to a horn comb mount. The design is lively and naturalistic, full of drama and movement.

The bird is made in an exquisite form of enamelling called *plique a jour*. In this most difficult form of work the translucent enamelling was done with a base plate in place. After firing this base plate is removed, leaving an ornament with enamel having the effect of a stained glass window. The effect is at its most beautiful when the ornament is worn as an upstanding aigrette, raised from the top of the head so that the light passes through the translucent parts of the design.

## 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. 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.

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.



Picture 6: Back comb, coloured postcard early 20th century

Picture 6 comes from a hand tinted postcard that is a little outside the scope of our discussion, coming from the early 20th century. However it illustrates very well how the influence of Art Nouveau became watered down and distilled in these popular ornaments. The sitter wears a very pretty back comb with a distinctly oriental look. It appears to be made from metal with large graduated circular bosses set with cabochon jewels. The softly draped chiffon scarf and delicately beaded evening gown are very much a la mode.

## Turn of the century hair styles and ornaments

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.



Picture 7: Back view of Pompadour hairstyle with supporting combs, photograph late 19th century

One popular fashion was known as the pompadour, after the famous mistress of Louis XV. 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. Picture 7 shows a back view of this hairstyle where the sitter has used three handsome Art Nouveau style combs to support it. This coiffure, and the matching set of combs, can be compared with those worn by the model in picture 4.

We can see that as well as maintaining the pompadour or Gibson girl coiffure, these combs also helped to support the huge hats of the late Victorian and Edwardian period. 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.

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 woman wished to own beautiful ornaments. However 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.

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 8: Star shaped aigrette, contemporary postcard late 19th or early 20th century

One popular and rather charming trend in the late 19th and early 20th century was the fondness for what we might call sentimental motifs. Typical ones butterflies, birds, flowers, hearts, crescents, horse-shoes, flowers, fans, lover's knots, and stars. These styles mainly appeared in small two pronged combs and hairpins of blonde horn or amber-coloured celluloid and headings set with white diamante, sometimes combined with faux pearls, or pale coloured stones like turquoise, moonstones or coral. These small hairpins were scattered over the evening coiffure and appeared in a wide variety of materials and styles.

The most popular of these hairpins take the form of an elaborate encrusted \*star\* or \*flower\* type design. We find them in French jet, diamante, Vauxhall glass, filigree and cut steel. Picture 8 is taken from a cabinet photo of the Edwardian actress Vesta Tilly and shows her to be wearing a very beautiful diamond star ornament in the front of her updo. This large star motif has upstanding spikes arising from it with the elements placed upon knife edge wires which quiver when the wearer moves. This kind of ornament is called an aigrette.

Notice too the great amount of elaborate jewellery the actress is wearing. The bodice of her gown is festooned with an entire collection of gem set jewellery. Not content with wearing a tall dog collar type necklace encircling her throat she had yet another worn below it. Such prodigious amounts of jewellery worn all at once were not unusual among the social elite.



**Picture 9: Sitter wearing diamond crescent hairpin, late 19th century**

Picture 9 shows a sitter with the softly draped hairstyle of the Fin de Siecle period ornamented by a diamond crescent, another of the popular sentimental motifs.

Our last illustration of Victorian hair combs, picture 10, gives us a more realistic picture of what ordinary women were actually wearing in the late 19th century. This comes from a delightful cabinet picture of three members of a Victorian family which appear to be a young couple and an older lady who is probably the mother of one partner.



**Picture 10: Cabinet photo of three family members, circa 1895**

We can date this picture to about 1895 by the fashionable sleeves that the two women are 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. Both female sitters wear a very small hair pick or pin, which is light and delicate in appearance. 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 two ladies have all chosen ornaments of differing styles they are worn in a similar way. The comb is now worn 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.