



Victorian Combs & Hair Accessories

1840 - 1860

Historical background

In previous guides I attempted to show that accessories worn in the hair are influenced by, and related to, other aspects of costume and dress, such as jewellery and hairdressing. In a similar way, developments in these areas are also influenced by historical events and social movements in the wider world. This was especially true of the reign of Victoria, which was a period of more rapid social change and mechanization than had hitherto been experienced.

Queen Victorian ascended the throne in 1837. At the beginning of the reign, although the movement which we now refer to as the Industrial Revolution had been a force in the land since the late 18th century, articles of jewellery, personal adornment and clothing were, for the most part, still hand made.

Comb making was a cottage industry, with the raw materials being prepared by the comb makers themselves, who hand worked these objects of beauty. Much of the laborious work of staining and polishing the combs was done by the wives and families of the craftsmen. By the end of the reign hair combs were being mass produced in factories. Vast numbers were stamped out, in seemingly endlessly varied designs, which could be ordered from catalogues. Synthetics such as celluloid were fast usurping the place of natural materials like tortoiseshell, ivory and horn.

However at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign all these monumental changes lay in the distant future. Careful hand craftsmanship was still the watchword of the day.



Picture 1: Fashion plate from the journal *La Belle Assemblée* showing the costume and hairdressing of the mid 1840s

Picture 1 shows a Victorian fashion plate of the late 1840s from an English journal called *La Belle Assemblée*. It depicts three fashionable young ladies in low necked ball gowns, the woman in the high necked dress being a cloakroom attendant.

We can see that the skirts of fashionable gowns were growing fuller, and fall from a tiny waist in a series of deep flounces. In my guide on the late Georgian and Regency period we saw high exaggerated up-dos which have now passed out of use. Their place has been taken by a low topped dressing which is either draped demurely over the ears or bunched at the sides in ringlets. The chignon, into which the back hair is coiled, provides a perfect setting for the more modestly sized hair combs which are now fashionable. For young ladies and girls wreaths and garlands made from flowers and ribbons are one of the favourite forms of ornamentation for the hair.

Hair accessories inspired by the past

This part of the 19th century is often called the “Romantic” because it coincides with a period in literature when poetry and novels express a number of sentimental discourses. In terms of the applied arts too this was an age which was deeply influenced by the spirit of past ages.

We saw in my guide on Georgian and Regency hair combs how the modes of the early years of the 19th century inclined towards those of classical antiquity. In the second quarter of the century the fashion shifted to cultivate a great nostalgic interest in the architectural and artistic styles of periods such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

In combs and hair accessories these various influences appear in indirect ways, rather than in deliberate re-creations of the jewels worn during those times. For example, the craftsmen used motifs and patterns which, for them, represented the era of the jewel they wished to recreate.



Picture 2: Sterling silver hair comb with engraved and chased decoration in the so-called Renaissance style

Small pointed tiaras and ornamental hair combs in gold and silver were very fashionable. Their surfaces were chased and engraved into what the designers fondly imagined were "Renaissance" type designs. This usually meant that the motifs were very elaborate with fat scrollwork or formalised flower heads with foliate leaves surrounding them.

Picture 2 shows an attractive silver hair comb with a pretty scalloped outline. This probably dates from the 1840s or 1850s. Although the cartouche in the centre bears a basket of flowers motif which is pure Victorian, the engraved design of the background is worthy of note. This is an attempt by the designer to produce what he thought was a Renaissance style pattern. Picture 3 is a close up of another comb done in a similar style. These ornaments are typical of the rather conservative design ethos of the early Victorian period.



Picture 3: Detail of hair comb showing chased and engraved work in the Renaissance style

From the late 1840s onwards several important influences came to bear upon jewellery design, and therefore upon hair accessories. One of these was a vogue which lasted well into the high Victorian period for so-called *archaeological* styles. Various important excavations and discoveries took place throughout the 19th century which led to a taste for ornaments in the Egyptian, Assyrian, Etruscan, Greek and other "historical" styles.



Picture 4: Silver hair combs in the *archaeological* style with ram's heads

For example the hand wrought silver hair comb shown in picture 4 is clearly influenced by the important excavations done at Nineveh by Sir Henry Layard in 1847, and those who followed him. The city, situated in what is now modern Iraq, was the capital of the ancient Assyrian empire. The ram was considered one of the most potent symbols of royalty and of the gods, and is found throughout the remains of the city in various forms.

However the *archaeological* taste is not usually quite as obvious as this in hair accessories. It is often represented by inclusion of such motifs as scarabs, lotus flowers, masks or amphorae. The classical Greek key fret appears in hair accessories throughout the Victorian period in a range of widely diverse materials such as enamel, cut steel, and pique inlay into tortoiseshell.

Looking back to the Middle Ages another important influence upon jewellery design was the Gothic. Gothic Revival is an architectural phase of the Romantic Movement, which looked back upon and idealized the past. It is particularly associated with literature and architecture. Out of the movement came such well known literary works as the knights-and-castles novels of Sir Walter Scott. American counterparts are the stories of Cooper, Poe, and Hawthorne.

The English upper classes took up the Gothic style, and mingled it with romantic ideas of chivalry and courtesy in fancy dress parties and pageants. One of the most celebrated of such events was the famous Eglinton Tournament of 1839, which was a re-enactment of a joust and revel. Here fashionable men and women dressed up in a fancy dress version of medieval costume as knights and ladies, much as modern re-enactors do. There was feasting and jousting and many lavish costumes complete with jewels in the Gothic style. Although the actual event was ruined by torrential rain, and somewhat chaotic, it was widely reported in the newspapers of the day.



Picture 5: Queen Victorian and Prince Albert shown in Medieval costume with gothic style jewellery and accessories

Even Queen Victoria and Prince Albert joined in this passion for fancy dress balls and all things Gothic. Picture 5 shows the royal couple dressed in medieval costume complete with Gothic embellishments. Notice the elaborate pointed coronets which both are wearing.

As well as architecture and furnishings, jewellery and items of personal adornment were produced in the Gothic style. In the latter it is characterised by such pseudo-Gothic details as heraldic designs and colours (often executed in enamel), pointed arches, crosses, and ecclesiastical-looking details.



Picture 6: Diamond and emerald tiara made in the Gothic revival style, circa 1850s

Picture 6 is a beautiful example of a precious tiara made in the Gothic revival style. This tiara was designed by Prince Albert for Queen Victoria, and is still kept in the royal collection belonging to the British monarch. Although the design is a somewhat watered down version of what we think of as Gothic, we can clearly see the influence in the upstanding lozenge shaped motifs which are set with emeralds. These are placed in between large baroque cut emeralds which surmount the top of the piece in a graduated arch.

Inspiration from other cultures

A second important influence which affected the design of jewellery and hair accessories from the 1840s was that adapted from foreign cultures. Chief of these was the Algerian or Moorish. In the early 1840s the French - Algerian Wars led to an interest in what was called *Moorish Art*. Later the Crimean War further helped to popularize Turkish and Oriental designs in Britain. Furniture which is vaguely Islamic in character, inlaid with ivory and mother of pearl was found in many Victorian homes. Several of these pieces have come down to me from my own family, which shows that they were common drawing room objects for middle class people. Some even had complete rooms done out in the Moorish or Turkish style.

This spirit is strongly reflected in the design of comb headings until the 1880s. Motifs such as the Algerian knot, looped chains, tassels and curiously shaped pendeloques appear in the so called *Peigne d'Alger*. This type of comb had a heading formed as a series of arches or elaborate piercings with pendant beads hanging in them. Or it might be looped with an intricate arrangement of gilt chains, each terminating in a tassel, or pendant of filigree, gold, or faux pearls.



Picture 7: *Peigne d'Alger* or hair comb in the Algerian style with elaborate looped chains and cut crystal drops

These pendants were designed to hang down over the fashionable chignon and swing as the wearer moved. Picture 7 shows a very beautiful and unusual of the *peigne d'Alger* which has pendeloques of woven gilt finished off with pendants of faceted crystal. The comb, which

probably dates from the end of our period, has a hinged heading of gilt metal openwork. It is bordered with small claw set pastes and has five large graduated crystals set across the curve of the heading.

We can see that this comb is adjustable to the degree that it can be opened out flat by means of a hinge which attached the metal heading to the separate teeth part. These latter are made from clarified horn which was the usual arrangement. If you look at the top of the picture just above the large central crystal you will see two small brass studs in the horn which hold the hinge in place.

Combs were becoming a great deal more sophisticated in their technical execution as the period advanced. By the 1850s many were no longer made in one solid piece but were provided with the kind of metal hinge (shown in picture 7) which allowed the heading to rotate. The presence of this hinge on an example indicates a date well into the Victorian period and some are flexible enough to rotate through a full 180 degrees.

If the comb had an upstanding top shaped like a coronet or tiara then it could be worn in several ways because the angle of the heading could be adjusted. It could be placed above the forehead as a mini tiara, with the teeth projecting backwards and concealed by the wearer's hair. Or it could be sited within the chignon with the top folded down. This mechanism was especially attractive when used with the *peigne d'Alger* type comb. It allowed the ornament to be adjusted to the right angle so that the long ornate pendants would move and swing without becoming fouled in the hair.



Picture 8: Hinged comb in cut-steel showing the construction and method of adjustment

Picture 8 is a side view taken from of one of these adaptable combs. This beautiful ornament is made in an attractive material known as cut steel, which was used for comb headings throughout the 19th century.

Cut steel gives the initial impression of marcasite. However whereas marcasite consists of small "gemstones" set into a background, cut steel is something very different. It is composed of individual faceted and polished steel jewels which are closely set into position by being riveted to a metal backing plate. In Victorian workmanship the steels are used in three dimensional encrusted patterns which are often built up in layers to form designs of leaves, flowers, stars and scrollwork. This example shows a coronet effect, and the hinged arrangement attaching heading to teeth is clearly visible.

The Influence of Travel and Tourism

A third background influence which was becoming evident as the 19th century advanced was that of travel. The aristocracy had long recognised the benefits of travel. However from the mid 19th century rich middle class British and American tourists began to travel Europe in order to finish their education and broaden their horizons. Many of these intrepid early travellers returned to their native shores with ornaments and jewellery of carved ivory, coral or cameo. In the 1860s Thomas Cook began their first organised tours of Europe, and from there the tourism industry has never looked back. It was this fondness for collecting in far away places which explains the presence of much European and Oriental jewellery that is available in the antiques world today.



Picture 9: Suite of carved coral hair accessories in the form of fuchsia flowers and berries

Picture 9 shows a very beautiful suite of carved coral jewellery from the 1840s or 1850s consisting of a hinged comb mount and two matching hairpins. It is made in the form of berries interspersed with fuchsia flowers. The fuchsias have small gold centres and are nicely carved to represent the flower forms. Long pendants terminating in gold beads hang from the extremities of the comb and the heads of the hairpins.

Coral, highly prized for most of the Victorian period, was one of the materials imported from Italy in great quantity. Varying in colour from pale pink to deep red (the shade preferred by the Victorians) it was made into a wide range of jewellery and hair accessories. Coral could either be carved or left in its natural branch like state. In this latter form it was often made into tiaras and comb mounts, sometimes with the addition of berries in a differently coloured coral, gold, or pearls.

At this stage there was a definite etiquette which governed the wearing of jewellery and personal ornaments. Precious stones like diamonds and large important jewels such as tiaras were the province of older married ladies. Young unmarried women and girls were expected to make do with ornaments of less intrinsic worth. Materials like coral, ivory and pearls were considered especially suitable for people in this group.

Another form of jewellery imported in great quantity from Italy was that which incorporated cameos. Many of these were cut from the shell of the helmet or queen conch shell and were imported from Rome and Naples. Various other materials, such as coral, ivory and jet were also carved into cameos by the ingenious Italian workers.

The final illustration in this guide shows a very beautiful and large back comb which is mounted with a row of no less than eleven graduated cameos placed in a curve across the arched band of the comb. These cameos are of excellent workmanship and are set in gold mounted upon a tortoiseshell comb. However there were cheaper versions set in gilt metal.



Picture 10: Hair comb adorned with a row of carved coral cameos, circa late 1850s

This is quite a large and impressive comb, indicating that the volume of fashionable hairstyles was increasing. So too was the width of ladies' skirts, thanks to the development of the wire crinoline cage which held them in the fashionable bell shape.

By the late 1850s the fashionable female silhouette had gained the outline which we have come to think of as typically Victorian. Fashionable ladies were now taking up a great deal of room! As hairstyles became ever more voluminous and complex they required more and more false hair. This in turn encouraged the development of the large and important looking combs and hair accessories of the high Victorian period.

We shall look at some of these big elaborate hair ornaments and the background which inspired them in the next of my guides, which covers the years 1860 – 1880.

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.