Simitra's
Exquisite Things

Victorian Combs & Hair Accessories

1860 - 1870

High Victorian fashion

By the mid 19th century female costume 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 skirts now required many yards of material to make them. In addition, the surface of these vast gowns was further elaborated by flounces, braids, tassels and trims of every imaginable kind.

However we must remember that only a small proportion of the most wealthy and fashionable women wore these exaggerated styles, and most people dressed much more modestly. Fashion plates like those in picture 1 show an idealised version of the mode, a vision of what people aspired to look like, rather than how they actually appeared.

Picture 1: French fashion plate from *Le Petit Courier des Dames,* 1863

By the 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. In personal adornment there was a preference for strongly coloured gemstones, which were housed in elaborate settings. There was also a wide and eclectic taste for a whole range of different materials such as mother of pearl, jet, tortoiseshell, cut steel, and so on.

Lack of inspiration in applied arts

This was an age of great technological advances in the applied arts. Hand craftsmanship in the making of personal ornaments was fast giving place to mass production in factories which resembled their modern equivalents. Although even the cheapest ornaments were sturdy and well made by our standards, there was a lack of individuality in design. It was as though the creative momentum behind decorative art in Europe had begun to falter.

19th century artists seem to have lost the confidence in themselves to create anything original. Instead they looked always to the past for inspiration. No really new styles evolved in the jewellery industry. The *archaeological* and *Algerian* or *Moorish* influences continued, in watered down forms, into the 1880s. These self-consciously modern jewels were made in homage to ancient prototypes so that they could be worn by modern women. It is difficult for us to understand why this should be so in a society which made such spectacular advances in other areas of endeavour.

Elaborate hairstyles and huge combs

Along with the vast crinoline skirt, female hairstyles were also increasing in size and complexity. Great quantities of false hair were now used. The hair was generally drawn back into a great chignon, often with the addition of long ringlets as well. This style positively encouraged the wearing of large and important hair accessories of all kinds. So varied were

these mid Victorian hair accessories that I believe the 1860s and 1870s each merit a guide to themselves.

Picture 2: Fashionable hairdressing from a contemporary cabinet photo of the late 1860s

Picture 2 illustrates an example of fashionable hairdressing from the late 1860s. We can see that the sitter wears her hair partly up in a great twisted chignon on the crown, to which has been added an upstanding mantilla type hair comb. The majority of her hair hangs loose upon her back and shoulders in a style known as *depeignee* (uncombed). She has pearl drop earrings and an elaborate necklace with pendants.

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.

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: *Peigne Josephine* of carved tortoiseshell set with finely executed cameos

Picture 3 is a very beautiful example of this genre of hair comb. The openwork heading is

done in one with the prongs and is carved from one large solid piece of tortoiseshell. Notice the characteristic random mottling of the material and how the light passes through it. The heading is mounted with three fine shell cameos in the classical style. They are typically oval shaped, with the largest and finest being mounted in the centre.

Picture 4: an example of a Peigne Josephine or balls comb, 1860s

Picture 4 is an example of a balls comb of a more popular type which was mass produced in factories. The comb has the usual clarified horn teeth and hinged mount of gilt metal. Here it is worn with within the chignon of the mannequin. This one is shaped like a coronet and each of its points is surmounted by a ball of black and white striped onyx. As usual the balls are graduated in size and arranged in an arc with the largest in the centre. The number is almost always uneven, five and seven being the most common numbers. Very occasionally these combs are made with the balls of an even number or all of one size

We have seen how, in the mid to late 1850s, decorative 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.

Picture 5: Carved tortoiseshell tiara comb with pique decoration

Picture 5 is a handsome example of this type of comb where the front part stands up proud from the head like a tiara. This lovely tortoiseshell comb has elaborate decoration of a kind called pique. Pique is a decorative treatment which involves the inlaying of precious metals into another substance, usually tortoiseshell, but occasionally horn or other substances.

This technique was extensively used for the decoration of hair combs and jewellery during the Victorian period. When heated the surface of natural plastics like horn and tortoiseshell becomes softened, so that small pieces of metal can be inlaid. When cool, the groundwork contracts holding the inclusion tightly into position without the need for adhesive. Pique is usually found all in gold. However the very best work involves not only the inlay of points or dots but also small decorative flakes of other materials such as silver or mother of pearl.

Many of these combs had a long curving heading, like a bandeau, which extended down the sides of the head. Picture 6 is a handsome example with a heading in engraved brass. We can see that the sides of the heading extend backwards in an arc. This comb could have been worn on the front of the hair as a mini tiara of further backwards to encircle the base of the chignon. It could also have been placed in the back of the dressing since it is fitted with a flexible hinge in the typical mid century fashion.

Picture 6: A bandeau comb with long curved sides to encircle the head

Another way in which such combs could be worn was to place them within the chignon, this time with the heading folded down. In this position, the comb served to conceal the place where false hair may have been added to supplement the natural hair of the wearer. It was also used to anchor the aforementioned snood which was so popular for day wear. In these examples, both the teeth and the heading would be gently curved giving a comfortable and secure fit to the back of the skull.

The Algerian or *Cascade* comb

Another favourite theme for ornamental combs which continued from the previous period was the so-called *Moorish* or *Algerian* look. In the early 1840s the French –Algerian Wars had led to an interest in Moorish themes which percolated into every aspect of the decorative arts. Later the Crimean War (1853–1856) involved Britain fighting against the Ottoman Empire. This helped to prolong the interest in Turkish and Oriental designs in Britain. Therefore we find these Moorish themes occurring in jewellery and hair accessories through to the late Victorian period of 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 chains, each terminating in a tassel, or pendant of filigree, gold, or faux pearls. These pendants were designed to hang down over the fashionable chignon and swing as the wearer moved. These combs with long dangling pendants were also known as *cascade* combs

Picture 7: A peigne d'Alger comb of the most elaborate type with multiple tassels and pendants

Picture 7 shows one of the most elaborate and beautiful interpretations of the *peigne d'Alger* that I have ever seen. This comb, originally part of the Norma Hague collection, is now in private ownership. It has teeth of blonde horn and a curved and hinged heading of gilt metal. Placed upon this are three large gilt flowers which are further embellished with black ceramic beads. Gilt chains which are woven out of hollow mesh tubes are festooned across the heading, terminating in long tassels of more black beads, cupped in gold to represent buds. Even more beaded tassels depend from the large central flower. The comb is fully articulated on its hinge and opens out almost flat, so that it can be placed anywhere within the back hair for maximum effect.

Picture 8: Gilt metal and faux pearl Algerian style comb, circa 1860-70

Picture 8 illustrates another handsome example of this most typical and elaborate high Victorian comb type. It is made in a similar fashion to that of picture 7 with horn prongs and a gilt metal heading save that the method of embellishment is fashioned from faux pearls. Set in the centre is a large half daisy or marguerite with the petals represented by long pear shaped pearls. This is flanked by gilt vine leaves, with small faux pearls representing the fruits. A fringe of pearls hangs from the centre front of the heading.

Victorian Mourning

Our last section in this guide is devoted to a consideration of Victorian mourning ornaments, and brings the discussion of this decade to a rather sombre close.

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 in britain 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 Britain, and an increasingly important social custom. Victorian mourning etiquette was aimed mainly at women, widows in particular. The observance of mourning 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 without full black attire and a weeping veil. Her activities were initially restricted to church services and visits to close relatives. Anything which implied pleasure was strictly forbidden.

Mourning attire was the perfect way to show the wealth and respectability of a woman. There was a very strict etiquette as to what fabrics, colours and ornaments could be worn. Widows and close relatives of the departed one 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.

Picture 9: Dyed horn and Vulcanite cameo comb probably worn for mourning

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 town 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.

Picture 9 shows an interesting if somewhat sombre example of a mid Victorian hair accessory which may well have been worn for mourning. Its large size and sturdy construction shows that it probably dates from the mid to late 1860s or early 1870s. The comb is hinged and fully articulated, and is made from natural horn which has been dyed black. The cameo is of Vulcanite or hard rubber. Placed in the centre is a large classical type cameo of a woman with vine leaves in her hair.

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 j*et* hair ornaments were, in fact, made from a substitute called French jet. This substance has nothing to do with real jet or France. It 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: French jet jewellery and hair accessories worn for secondary mourning, cabinet photo late 1860s

From the mid 19th century the development of photography and the popularity of posing for photographic portraits provides us with an invaluable new source of information for costume, hairdressing and hair accessories. In cabinet photographs and the smaller *carte de visite* we find many delightful illustrations of middle class ladies whose aim was to show off the elaborate and expensive ornaments with which their husbands or fathers could provide them. These invariably show people posing in studios wearing their "best" clothes and jewellery. However they are far more indicative of what people actually wore, and how costume appeared on the human form, than the idealised figures depicted in fashion plates.

Picture 10 is a contemporary cabinet photograph of such a pretty young 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 after the first year of deep black.

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.

In addition to her hair ornaments the sitter wears a quantity of other 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 away. Around her neck is an extremely elaborate necklace which is made up of articulated links and festooned with long drops of what appears to be cut and faceted jet.

As the end of the 1860s dawned, the fashions again changed. The crinoline skirt altered its form. From a bell shape it became a triangle with a flattened front and the fullness concentrated at the back in a long train. Hair styles grew, if anything, even more elaborate than ever. They had a complex chignon combined long dangling ringlets, and as much artificial hair as ever was required in order to construct them.

Many of the fashions which we have discussed here carried on into the 1870s. We continue to find hair combs and jewellery made in variations of the archaeological and Algerian styles, as well as the Renaissance and the Gothic.

However an important new ornament, or rather, the return of a familiar old one, was to again become prominent in hair accessories. After 40 years of being out of style, the large and beautiful Spanish mantilla comb returned to fashion.

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 while 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.