



## **Edwardian Combs & Hair Accessories**

### **1900 - 1910**

# The Fashions of 1900

At this time the tiara was the headdress selected by society women for most formal occasions. The new King Edward VII was fanatical about correct dress, especially at the British court. There is a story that when he was staying at a country house party, one society lady arrived late and was unable to find the case with her most valuable jewels. So instead of the usual tiara she wore a diamond crescent in her hair. The King rebuked her, saying “*The Queen has taken the trouble to wear a tiara, why haven’t you?*”

This illustrates the fact that, at least in Britain, wearing the correct costume and accessories for the time of day and the occasion was still deeply bound up with the observance of etiquette. Only a few years later women in Britain and America were bobbing their hair and raising their skirts, and the world moved into the so-called Flapper era.

In picture 1 we see the new fashion silhouette of the Edwardian era. The line is now very much softer and simpler, with the skirt smooth over the hips. It falls in a bell shape, with the fullness concentrated at the bottom. We can also see that these modish ladies are standing in what to us is a very odd fashion, a stance produced by the fashionable corset. This is known as the *S-bend* in which the chest is thrust forward and the hips back.



Picture 1: Fashion plate from *The Queen* 1903

Both of these fashionable ladies are wearing their hair in a style which is much softer, fuller and more flattering than the complex Victorian styles. At the turn of the 20th century hairstyles 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 2: The Gibson Girl hairstyle, contemporary photograph c1900

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 is sometimes referred to as the Gibson Girl coiffure. 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.

Pictures 1 and 2 both illustrate this Gibson Girl or Pompadour coiffure. We can see that the sitter in picture 2 has the mass of her hair piled towards the front. It is supported by a wide back comb which can just be discerned in the photograph. Wide combs of this type, often worn in sets, were extremely popular. They are usually deeply curved to fit the back of the head and are often beautifully decorated with floral or formalised scrollwork designs.

## Classical Allusions

In tune with the simpler and softer hairstyles which became fashionable around the turn of the 20th century, ornamental hair accessories of all kinds became smaller and more delicate in form. Many of these ornaments were made in openwork, filigree of silver or silver gilt, or with delicate airy patterns. We find many beautiful combs, barrettes and tiaras which while being very beautiful and finely made, were designed in a rather conservative style.



Picture 3: Rococo style hair comb in shell with gold filigree, early 20th century

This style was given fanciful names like neo-classical, Etruscan and so on. However these so-called classical hair accessories had nothing in common with the jewellery of the Greeks or the Romans. As we have seen in previous periods, designers simply plundered civilisations from the past for their motifs and used them as the centrepiece of a purely contemporary piece.

For example, Picture 3 shows a hair comb which is described as being in the Rococo style. This means that it features pierced openwork motifs like chubby scrolls and volutes which were felt at the time to be 18th century in feeling. This is a pretty hair a comb made in natural tortoiseshell with an overlay of pierced gold work. Its style is typical of the small combs and hairpins of the period. However it is difficult to see anything authentically Rococo in the design, other than the fanciful name given by the maker!

## A Passion for Diamonds

In the new lighter jewellery the gemstone of choice for primary ornaments were South African diamonds, which were mined in immense quantities from the 1880s onwards. Platinum was the preferred metal for settings. Such was the immense popularity of diamonds that from about 1890 onwards almost all coloured stones were banished from fashionable wear. Only the paler stones such as pearls, opals and moonstones were considered suitable substitutes.

Some historians of costume have attributed the popularity of diamonds to the fact that public buildings were now beginning to be lit by electricity, which enhanced the sparkle of the stones. However we must remember that only the very wealthy could afford this new invention in their private homes. Well into the 20th century, most homes were still illuminated by the softer gas light.

Decorative hair combs were generally made with a dainty openwork heading in silver or silver gilt filigree. Others had a single row of diamonds, turquoises or pearls across the top of the heading. They were primarily set with diamonds, although often combined with pearls, opals or turquoises. There had been great technical improvements in the cutting of diamonds and other gemstones so as to enhance their sparkle. So the main purpose of all this diamond jewellery was to concentrate the attention of the onlooker upon the beauty and quality of the stones rather than their surround. It was now fashionable to keep the settings of gemstones as inconspicuous as possible.



Picture 4: Pearl and diamond tiara comb, early 20th century

The beautiful tiara comb in picture 4 is a characteristic example of the period. It has tines of dark tortoiseshell and a hinged heading of platinum set with pearls and diamonds. The arcaded openwork design with formalised floral elements is typical.

Most primary ornaments of this period were composite, meaning that they could be divided up and used in alternative ways. Tiaras could be broken up into separate elements to be used as brooches, necklaces and dress ornaments. Many necklaces were provided with a lightweight framework upon which they could be mounted to do duty as tiaras. And there were comb fittings upon which pendants and brooches could be mounted to allow them to be worn in the hair.

## Accessories in Secondary Materials

Now that the colour had been drained from primary jewellery, it was not surprising that ornaments in secondary materials also followed suit. For those who could not afford platinum set diamonds there were cheaper substitutes in the form of pastes set into Aluminum. This metal proved to be an acceptable substitute on account of its pale appearance.

Aluminum is an interesting metal. Frenchman Henri Sainte-Claire Deville produced the first useful Aluminum in 1854. The metal made its first public appearance the next year, at the 1855 Paris Exposition. Until 1862, it was considered a rare metal, and was used mostly for jewellery, decorative objects and delicate mechanical parts. As technological developments made Aluminum more widely available, it came to symbolize modernity, and its malleability was soon appreciated by practitioners of the avant-garde and Art Nouveau. It was later used for much Modernist influenced jewellery and personal ornaments.



**Picture 5: Aluminum and rhinestone hair comb, early 20th century**

Aluminum set with rhinestones, which always appear rather greyish, was used for many attractive hair accessories at this period. Picture 5 is a typical example. This pretty comb has tines made not of genuine shell but of celluloid faux tortoiseshell. The unusual asymmetrical design of the heading with its flowing lines shows something of the spirit of the Art Nouveau influence without being overtly in that mode.

In my discussion covering the years 1880 to 1900 I gave a short account of the Art Nouveau movement, whose influence lasted from roughly 1895 to 1910. Despite the care and quality of craftsmanship that went into Art Nouveau ornaments they never enjoyed great economic success. The market for them was simply too limited. The jewels did not appeal to the aristocracy who preferred the spectacular glitter of diamonds. At the same time these hand made one off pieces were far too expensive for ordinary working people.

In response to demands from the lower end of the market, manufacturers began to mass produce hair accessories with watered down versions of Art Nouveau motifs and designs. Great quantities of machine made combs, pins and barrettes were produced between the years 1895 to 1910. Most were simply stamped out of sterling silver, with even cheaper versions being made in silver plated metal.



**Picture 6: Silver hair comb Birmingham 1904**

Picture 6 is a typical example of such ornaments. This one was made in the United Kingdom in the city of Birmingham and bears the date letter of 1904. It has a pretty asymmetric pattern with formalised florals and scrollwork, and a vaguely Art Nouveauish feeling. The engraved detail which finished the ornament and enlivens the design is typical. Such hair accessories are very plentiful today because they were stamped out in the factories of Britain and America

in their thousands. American examples do not, of course, have a date letter but are simply marked *Sterling*.

## Sentimental Motifs

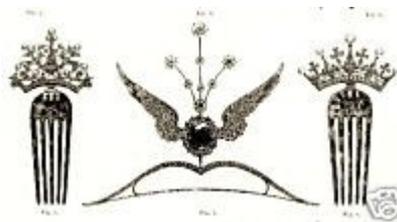
At the turn of the 20th century there was a tremendous fondness for what we might call sentimental motifs. Typical designs were butterflies, birds, flowers, hearts, crescents, horse-shoes, flowers, fans, lover's knots, and stars. These styles mainly appeared in small two pronged combs and hairpins of blonde horn or amber-coloured celluloid. They had 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.



Picture 7: Diamond star aigrette, contemporary cabinet photo of *Vesta Tilly*, early 20th century

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 7 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.

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 8: Engraving of aigrette type and hair accessories, *The Queen* 1901

Picture 8 is an engraving of 1901 from the English fashion magazine *The Queen* showing modish hair accessories. These delicate and pretty combs are typical of ornaments which were produced for popular wear at the beginning of the 20th century. They are typical of a

whole class of jewellery which appealed to well dressed women who wished to follow the mode at a discreet distance, rather than to dress in the first extreme of fashion.

The design in the centre is for a tiara with one of the currently popular sentimental wings motifs. From it arise a number of flowers placed on the aforementioned knife edge wires. We can see that all three hair accessories have a tall upstanding tendency. They are of the type which is known as an aigrette.

## The Aigrette

At the turn of the twentieth century the aigrette, particularly in diamonds or clear rhinestones, was one of the quintessential hair accessories associated with the period.

An aigrette is any kind of tall upstanding ornament which rises up proud from the top of the head, to give the wearer height and dignity. Head dresses of this type were favoured by older married women, who wore them at the front or side of a very high chignon as in picture 7. It was also a matter of choice as to whether the aigrette stood straight up in the air or inclined somewhat to one side. As the decade progressed, it became fashionable to have the aigrette, which often took the form of a feather or bird of paradise plume, inclined to one side.

If we look back again at picture 8 we can see that this ornament is of the type known as a *trembler*. In this particular example the elements which arise from the central motif are placed upon fine wires, so that they quivers and flash when the wearer moves.



Picture 9: *Trembler* aigrette with spiral spring, early 20th century

In other aigrettes the motif that is designed to tremble- usually a butterfly, star or flower- is placed at the end of a fine spring made of spiral wire. Picture 9 shows such an ornament placed on the head of a mannequin whose wig is dressed in the high chignon of the period. The vibrating motif takes the form of a flower in silver gilt filigree with rhinestone decorations. Small dangles attached to the bottom of the flower increase the sense of motion.

Small ostrich feathers in black, white or delicate colours were used as a background to these *trembler* hair accessories. They were dyed in colours to tone with the gown and thus tie the ensemble together. They also helped to conceal the wire spring, so that the ornament appeared to hover as though by magic above the head of the wearer. The comb mount, to which the other end of the spring was attached, would be concealed beneath the hair of the wearer.



Picture 10: Tiara by Child & Child, c 1910

Picture 10 is a tiara from the very end of the decade, and shows many of the salient points that we have discussed. Firstly the wings motif, executed in deep blue enamel, illustrates the sentimental theme. It also gives this beautiful tiara an Art Nouveau feel, without being overtly in the mode. The trembler ornament which forms the centrepiece of the tiara is really a mini aigrette. It has diamond drops set upon flexible wires which become agile when the wearer moves.

Another point to note is that this lovely ornament has a rather exotic, *Arabian Nights* feel to it. And along this road of the exotic is, in fact where fashionable costume and jewellery was headed at this time.

One of the most important influences towards the end of the decade was the taste for ornaments in the spirit of the Arabian Nights or of ancient Egypt. This was partly due to the fashion influence of couture designers like Paul Poiret, whose harem evening dresses were inspired by the costumes of the Russian Ballet. The ballet gave its first public performance in 1909, and its performance of the Arabian Nights fantasy *Scheherazade* took the capitals of Europe by storm. This led to a taste for jewellery and ornaments in what fashion designers felt to be the Oriental mode.

This element of the exotic in costume and hair accessories is one which I examine in some detail in my series of guides on Art Deco.

## 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.