



Hair Combs of the Art Deco Period Part 2 (Oriental)

In this guide I examine some of the influences which contributed to the development of the Art Deco style, and how they affected the design of ornamental hair combs during the 1920s.

In Art Deco part 1 I traced the origins of the style from a previous design movement known as Art Nouveau. However Art Deco was an eclectic movement, which gathered in elements from a number of different milieus. Some of the most important originated in various Middle Eastern and Oriental lands.

The Egyptian Influence

One of the most important influences upon the early Art Deco period 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 taste for the exotic in personal ornaments was given a fresh impetus by the discovery of the tomb of the boy king Tutankhamen in the early 1920s. The stunning treasures revealed there were an inspiration to designers working in media of all forms. The development of early Hollywood films also encouraged the Egyptian look when various historical and biblical epics reached the silver screen. In particular Theda Bara took the role of Cleopatra in 1917 and Claudette Colbert played the same part in 1934.

These exotic Egyptian ornaments provided an ideal theme for costume jewellery and personal ornaments. However, designers did not aim at authenticity. Instead they translated the mystical and symbolic grandeur of Egypt with a somewhat indiscriminate air. Ornaments were fitted out with an affective assembly of stylised motifs. These included scarabs, hieroglyphs, winged falcons, the lotus and papyrus plants, and profile heads of a vaguely Egyptian character.

Picture 1 is a good example of Egyptian Revival back combs of this type, dating from circa. 1910. It is made of celluloid faux tortoiseshell and has a gilt metal mounting with pseudo Egyptian type winged motifs similar to those seen on pectoral ornaments in the Tutankhamun treasure. At either extremity are placed scarabs in goldtone metal. Combs like this were intended to be worn at the back of the head, either above or beneath the chignon, and are usually deeply curved.



Picture 1: Egyptian Revival hair comb

Picture 2 is a later example in celluloid showing the head of a Pharaoh with rhinestone trim. This is an interesting example of a technique used in early synthetic combs whereby various layers in contrasting colours could be superimposed upon one another in a manner known as overlay. The layers were then cut through so that the one beneath showed through the design. They were produced in a two-tone casting whereby a core of one colour is overlaid upon a shell of another. Here, for example a core of transparent apple juice colour has been cast with a shiny black shell, and then hand finished by being carved and engraved. The effect appears most clearly are the edges of the foliage elements against which the Egyptian head is profiled. The design is further embellished with multi coloured rhinestones which are fused by heat into the celluloid.



Picture 2: Celluloid comb with the head of a Pharaoh

The workshop of Auguste Bonaz, whose products I examine in the third of these guides, was active in producing hair ornaments in the Egyptian revival mode. One of the most beautiful examples is a tiara comb illustrated in picture 3. This imaginative ornament encircles the head like a tiara, hence the name. It probably dates from the late 1920s or early 1930s. The foundation of faux tortoiseshell is shaped into a series of upstanding formalised lotus type flowers, which are further embellished by gilding and rhinestones.



Picture 3: Egyptian Revival tiara comb by Auguste Bonaz

Picture 4 is another Egyptian comb from the Bonaz workshop, this time in French ivory or Ivorene. This comb also has a formalised papyrus motif, and achieves its striking black upon white effect by the use of celluloid overlay, a technique which I discussed under picture 2.



Picture 4: French ivory overlay tiara comb with papyrus motif, Auguste Bonaz circa 1920s

One of the most unusual Art deco hair combs with a vaguely 'Egyptian' theme is shown in picture 5. This large example is very similar to a hair comb illustrated in Mary Bachman's book on plate 37, page 20. The Bachman example shows a similar three-lobed outline. The fruit selection is very similar and the Bachman example has two scarabs instead of one. This interesting comb has mounds of delicious looking fruit which are presented in three dimensional form and hand coloured.



Picture 5: Hair comb with fruit and scarab, see Bachman pl. 37

The Far East

In addition to the Egyptian and Middle Eastern, another important influence upon Art Deco was that of Far Eastern countries such as China and Japan. Hair combs having the glossy mirror like surface of Japanese or Chinese lacquer, or with the kinds of motifs seen in Japanese prints, were a particular favourite of the French designers.

Picture 6 is an advertisement for hair combs by the high end French workshop of Auguste Bonaz, the comb maker *par excellence* of the Art Deco period. These advertisements from Maison Bonaz are often very beautiful, and form an entire

collecting field in their own right. They furnish a great deal of information on the design of hair combs from that famous workshop. We can see that this ad, which comes from *Femina* magazine for 1920, features designs for oriental style combs presented by models dressed in Japanese kimono.

I examine the work of the Auguste Bonaz workshop in detail in another of these guides.



Picture 6: Advertisement for Oriental style combs by Auguste Bonaz

A typical example of this Far Eastern genre is the large semi translucent hair comb a detail of which is shown in picture 7. This has a pretty openwork design of cherry blossoms contained within a fan-shaped heading. Cherry blossom is a great favourite in Japanese culture and the brief season when the trees bloom is still celebrated in modern day Japan. The use of such design motifs is iconic within Japanese applied art and continues in hair ornaments and combs produced in contemporary Japan.

This Oriental influenced comb is also an example of a favourite Art Deco type whereby spoke like lines radiate out from the base of the heading. I will examine this iconic design in detail in another guide.



Picture 7: Oriental influence comb heading with cherry blossom

Another Japanese favourite is the bamboo plant. This is found everywhere in Japanese decorative art and is a typical mode of decoration upon traditional Japanese combs and hairpins, which I examine in another guide. Picture 8 shows a close up of the heading of a very beautiful celadon green hair comb whose lacy openwork is intended to represent bamboo. The bamboo plant bends beneath the weight of winter snow and does not break. Therefore, in Japanese culture, bamboo represents the qualities of strength, resilience and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. This lovely comb is another from the *atelier* of Auguste Bonaz.



Picture 8: Oriental hair comb by Auguste Bonaz representing bamboo

The hair comb shown in picture 6 is made in shiny black celluloid and is intended to simulate Japanese lacquer work. The small gold stamped designs scattered diaper wise across the heading are similar to the Japanese *mons* or family crest which are found upon garments and personal items in Samurai families.



Picture 9: Oriental style comb simulating black lacquer with Japanese *mons* type crest

Hair combs in the 'Chinese' style also appeared. Illustration 10 shows a large bright red hair comb simulating the appearance and look of Chinese lacquer furniture and ornaments. This one is a very elaborate example measuring fully 8 inches from the tip of the tines to the top of the crest. It has a fan shaped heading with a distinctive fluted shape and intricate openwork decoration. The colour red is important in Chinese culture and is considered to be lucky. For that reason it is the colour generally used for costume and decoration at weddings. The bright cinnamon red is therefore a hue which suggests Chinese lacquer ware.



Picture 10: Large red comb simulating Chinese lacquer ware

Designs from other cultures are often represented in watered down form in Art Deco comb designs. Among those I have seen are the kinds of stepped and radiating designs which are vaguely Aztec in derivation and still found in Mexican art. These radiating designs are greatly significant in the decoration of comb headings and will be examined in detail in the fourth of these guides.

Other ornaments have clearly been influenced by African symbolism similar to that found upon masks and other carvings. Tribal Africa was an important contributory influence to the art movement of Cubism and the early paintings of Picasso, another important input into Art Deco.

We can therefore appreciate that Art Deco was very much more than simply a 'geometric' style, which employed metals, plastics and mass production. On the contrary, it is a complex and highly sophisticated design movement in which many different contributory influences were melded and intertwined.

Contemporary craftspeople therefore had a vast and rich design vocabulary upon which they could draw for inspiration. One of the foremost designers of the Art Deco period, who is particularly noted for his signed hair combs and jewellery, is Auguste Bonaz. A discussion of the hair accessories produced by this workshop will form the subject material of the third of these Art Deco hair comb guides.

Further reading:

For those who would like to do some 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.

A 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.