



Hair Combs of the Art Deco Period

Part 3 (A Bonaz)

The Work of Auguste Bonaz

No discussion of Art Deco combs would be complete without a section on the Bonaz workshop, the master comb maker of the Art Deco era. The products of *atelier* Bonaz are highly sought after and every comb collector should try to have at least one example of the work of this high end French workshop.

History and design philosophy of Maison Bonaz

Maison Bonaz was founded towards the mid 19th century by Cesar, and was located in Oyannox, an area of France celebrated for comb making. His son Auguste opened a branch in Paris, which continued in business until 1982. The *atelier* Maison Auguste Bonaz is the most celebrated of all the Oyannox workshops, and received special mention for comb design in the Paris Exposition of 1925. It was from this event, the *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industrielles Modernes* that the shorter term Art Deco is derived. So we can see that there is a very significant connection between the Bonaz workshop and the times in which these wonderful creations were produced.

Auguste Bonaz, gifted with an innate artistic sense, perfectly grasped the complex demands of the female consumers of the period. He saw that the comb must compliment not only the colour of the hair and headgear, but also the clothing, the time of day, and the occasion for which the ornament is used. The Bonaz collection was largely distributed through high end perfume shops and ladies hairdressers, as well as major department stores throughout France. The often very beautiful advertisements for Maison Bonaz which appear in both French and English magazines of the period, are a collecting field in their own right. Some examples of advertisements for atelier Bonaz are included below.



Picture 1: Maison Bonaz ad *Femina* 1918

If you look carefully at picture 2 you will see that this idea of people reaching up towards a beautiful hair comb was the inspiration for the original artwork of my store logo!



Picture 2: Maison Bonaz ad *Femina* 1920

A leader in new techniques and materials

Maison Bonaz worked in new substances such as Bakelite and Galalith, and explored the versatility of the materials and their specific qualities. In retrospect we see that the work of House Bonaz was well in advance of its time. The work of Bonaz reflected the modern

qualities of the Constructivist and Futurist art movements, which were highly important contributory influences to Art Deco.

In Modernism the emphasis was upon the medium, and the process of production, rather than the intrinsic value of the materials. It is the final effect which is important. Futurism discarded the art of the past in favour of change, originality and innovation. It glorified the new technology of the automobile, the thrill of speed and power and movement. Another important influence upon Art Deco was that of the Bauhaus, which was an attempt to combine craftsmanship and high design with mass production. In this latter respect Bonaz succeeded admirably, for the ornaments produced by his workshop are always of the highest quality and finish.

Combs from the Bonaz workshop are recognisable by the signature of the designer, which usually appears on the back of one of the tines. A facsimile of this signature, which is always in cursive script, appears in picture 3. Sometimes the place name PARIS is added.



Picture 3: Facsimile signature of Maison Bonaz

The work of atelier Bonaz was amazingly varied and kept pace with changing fashions. Hair combs produced in the period 1910-early 1920s, as we can see from the early ads, were often very large, elaborate and spectacular, with rich surface texture. Picture 4 is a large and beautiful celadon green example with a curved profile. In the centre is an openwork panel filled with asymmetric plant forms whose organic lines show something of the lingering influence of Art Nouveau.



Picture 4: Hair comb with organic Art Nouveau influence circa early 1920s

These large Spanish style combs were worn in a very specific way which is illustrated in many fashion engravings of the period. They were thrust into the back hair, often at an acute angle, in such a way that they were visible from the back and sides. This allowed the beautiful openwork design or other decoration to be visible from all angles. This particular design in picture 4 seems to have been a stock pattern of Maison Bonaz, and I have seen it in black, cream (Ivorene), bright red and dark blue, apart from this handsome green example.



Picture 5: Elaborate faux tortoiseshell with applied gilding

Picture 5 shows another example which probably originates from this early period. This handsome ornament is made in celluloid faux tortoiseshell with an openwork border and carved ornamentation. Although it was produced by machinery there is obviously a degree of hand finishing in the application of detail. The design has been further embellished by gilding in several different golds.

Some of the combs worn at this period were so huge that they resembled the high mantilla combs or *Peinita* worn by Spanish ladies with their traditional costume. The production of the opera *Carmen* led to a fashion for high Spanish combs in the 1870s, and they again became the vogue during the early 20th century Art Deco period. In some of these combs the heading might be as much as eight or ten inches in height. These combs were worn with lace mantilla veils and were very popular for fancy parties and for dressing up, which were favourite occupations in English country houses.

Picture 6 shows a bright red comb by Auguste Bonaz which is so large that it resembles a Spanish *Peinita*. It has a high wedge shaped heading which is smooth and glossy like lacquer. The only adornment is a band of pierced decoration along the top.



Picture 6: Large and sculptural mantilla style hair comb circa mid 1920s

We can see that in example 6, which probably dates from the mid 1920s, the designs produced by atelier Bonaz were becoming simpler and more sculptural. However as the period evolved Bonaz created the most exciting of modernist costume ornaments, using pure, simple abstract forms, with only minimal surface ornament, for a very powerful effect. Picture 9 is an excellent example of this kind of work. The strong uncompromisingly angular shape shows a deep appreciation and understanding of the potential of the glossy transparent material, which is here presented as an acute triangle.



Picture 7: Comb influenced by Modernism and tribal Africa

This handsome and unusual comb is so-forward looking in its design that it might well have been made today, rather than about 90 years ago. In its simple asymmetric triangular shape it reflects the influence of popular art movements such as Cubism, Modernism and Futurism, which stress the idea of streamlined speed, smooth materials, and abstract, geometric forms. The comb has been made from one complete piece of translucent amber-coloured celluloid. This transparent ground is overlaid with an angular geometric pattern in glossy black which is reminiscent of the organic whorls seen on finger prints, or the symbolic patterns used in certain tribal arts. This is not surprising, since another of the important influences upon Art Deco was the art of tribal Africa, and in particular, African masks and carvings.

Changing fashions in the 1930s

As the period advanced, fashions invariably changed. Many women adopted the short haircut known as the bob, or the even shorter boyish crop called the shingle. In these brief coiffures there was no place for giant hair combs, which needed a chignon to anchor them. Hair ornaments did not disappear, for not all women wore their hair short. However they developed a very different character.

As the 1930s progressed, Art Deco became increasingly identified with the imagery of technology and speed. It emphasized the use of modern glossy materials, smooth seamless surfaces, and aerodynamic horizontal lines. This sleeker version of art deco, known as Art Moderne or Streamlined Moderne, supplanted the detailed geometric patterns of early Art Deco. The Art Moderne period (1935-1945) avoided frivolous swirls and bright colours, and instead streamlined into crisp geometric lines, all designs of decorative and utilitarian Art forms



Picture 8: Small side comb, late 1920s or early 1930s

Illustration 8 shows a small hair comb from Maison Auguste Bonaz which exemplifies this new style. In its simple asymmetric shape it reflects the influence of popular art movements such as Cubism, Modernism and Futurism, which stress the idea of streamlined speed, smooth materials, and abstract, geometric forms. With its stripped-down forms and geometric-based

ornamentation, the late Art Deco style appears rather sleek and lacking in ornamentation, while the slightly earlier Deco style of the 1920s can be quite showy. This is an excellent example of celluloid side-combs produced by the workshop of Auguste Bonaz during the 1930s. We can see that Maison Bonaz was still far ahead of its time concerning creation and design. Here Bonaz has created the most exciting of modernist costume ornaments, using simple abstract forms, with only minimal surface ornament.

By this time, the emphasis in a jewelled ornament had moved from the settings to a concentration upon the stones themselves. New ways of cutting gemstones were also perfected, and the favourite form of primary jewellery of the 1930s was diamonds set in platinum or white gold. These trends are also echoed in ornaments for the more budget-conscious woman which were made in gold or silver tone metal and set with rhinestones. Another ad for the Bonaz workshop, this time from the French magazine *L'Illustration* and dating to the late 1930s reflects this trend and is shown in picture 9.



Picture 9: Ad from *L'Illustration* late 1930s

This advertisement shows the kinds of small rhinestone hair ornaments which were favoured throughout the period 1930s to 1950s. Small hair combs, barrettes and head bands feature stars, chevrons, circles, swirls and bows and are usually ornamented with rhinestones that are prong set into chromed metal. This design phase has a very different philosophy than the much larger and showier hair ornaments of the period 1910 to 1930. However I will examine the hair ornaments of this Art Moderne period more fully in a later guide.



Picture 10: Detail of ad from *L'Illustration* showing vanities, 1947

The Bonaz workshop continued to produce vanity items of comparatively modest size, but always of the highest quality, until it ceased production in 1982. As well as hair combs, Maison Bonaz produced small cased dressing combs, usually in faux tortoiseshell with added rhinestone trim. These are in quite plentiful supply and are often found on eBay. We can also see by fashion ads of the period that Bonaz was also producing compacts and other vanities, often decorated in enamel. We find simple geometric designs in the 1930s and more

elaborate ones emerging in the 1940s. Some of these are shown in picture 10 which dates from *L'illustration* magazine of 1947.

In the ornaments and vanities in picture 10 we are seeing the emergence of a new phase of design, the elaborate manifestation of late Art Deco or Art Moderne which has come to be called neo-Baroque. This style is much more elaborate, colourful and florid. But that, of course, must be the topic for a future guide.

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 comb makers 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.