



Hair Combs of the Art Deco Period Part 4 (Designs)

Art Deco Techniques and Materials

Like many design movements that are now considered classic, Art Deco reflected a key moment in modern cultural history: the age of jazz, streamlined cars, elegant costumes, and those classic early skyscrapers. The artist craftspeople of the period also explored the potential of new synthetic materials and methods of mechanical (as opposed to hand made) production.

One of the features of the new style was that various kinds of synthetic were first employed as decorative forms in their own right, and in ways which celebrated their versatility. Formerly their use had been confined to providing budget-conscious people with cheaper substitutes for materials such as tortoise shell, amber, ivory and coral.

In 1930 the American Catalin Corporation developed a phenolic resin which they called Catalin. This formula used cast resin to produce ornaments in a wide range of pastels and vivid jewel-like hues, which had not been possible with classic opaque Bakelite. The main feature of these more modern materials is that they permitted a whole range of decorative effects.

By omitting the filling agents and varying the basic mixture it was now possible to produce artefacts that were completely clear, translucent, and in a whole range of fancy finishes such as marble, mother of pearl, amber, jade, moiré, and various mottled patterns. The book by Mary Bachman, whose details are cited below, is particularly strong in illustrating this amazing range of different fancy effects, which appear to have been a specialty of manufacturers in the USA as opposed to Europe.

The following pictures represent a small selection of the very beautiful colours and exotic effects which could now be produced in decorative hair combs.



Picture 1: 'Stained glass' effect hair comb from Maison Bonaz

Picture 1 is a beautiful early comb from the French high end workshop of Auguste Bonaz. It dates from the Art Nouveau to Art Deco transitional period which I discussed in the first of these guides. This lovely ornament is made in a form which gives the effect of stained glass in jewelled colour like a church window. It resembles the transparent enamel called *plique a jour* which was employed by French Art Nouveau jewellers like Rene Lalique to represent the wings of butterflies, and anywhere where extreme delicacy of effect was required.

The bright amber of the flowers and the more subdued green of the translucent leaves show off well against the opaque black ground when the ornament is held up to the light. However this ornament is not in stained glass but in early celluloid, and shows the great beauty which could be achieved with this material.



Picture 2: Delicately shaded comb in the transitional style

Picture 2 is another attractive effect in which the ornament is made with a number of different colours shading delicately from one to another. This beautiful example also has a transitional Art Nouveau to Art Deco design with a pretty scalloped border in celadon green. This fades through light green to yellow and then into warm orange on the bottom of the heading where it meets the tines. These latter are an opaque mid brown.



Picture 3: Imitation 'goldstone' comb in classic sunray design

The unusual comb in picture 3 is later. It is made from one of the newer synthetics, either Catalin or Lucite, which allowed a number of exotic decorative effects. In this case the openwork design on the heading has been made with tiny gold metallic fragments which are suspended in the plastic material. Combs like this seem to have originated in the USA and are generally known as glitter or sometimes goldstone effect combs. This is in imitation of the mineral known as goldstone which has glittering iron pyrites embedded in it. Trade names for such effects were *Tinseloid*, *Goldstone* or *Goldaleur*.

The Designs of the Jazz Age

In general, Art Deco designs incorporated elements of Cubist and Futurist art, all of which exerted an influence upon fashion, architecture and interior decor. Very jazzy and geometric, the designs of the 1920s celebrated all the excitement of the machine age and were definitely more angular, formalised and bold than the previous flowing designs of the Art Nouveau period. Popular motifs found in Art Deco hair combs were quarter moons, starbursts, birds, chevrons, circles, ovals, figure eights, waves, bows, squares and formalised flowers and foliage. However one group of motifs appears again and again in various guises. This is known to aficionados of the period variously as the spokes, sunray or palm design.

The Classic Sunray or Spokes Design

Art Deco truly reflected the spirit of the early twentieth century, expressing excitement over technological advancements, high speed transportation, and innovative new construction techniques. Motifs used in these designs incorporate icons of speed, technology and the love of the machine. We find this made manifest in iconic spoke-like motifs which resemble the wheel, and in the slick polished surfaces of metal and synthetic materials.

When we study the design of many of the decorative hair combs produced in this period we see unmistakable manifestations of this spoke like ornamentation. The motif was an archetypal Art Deco one, and appears as a series of lines or panels which radiate out from the base of the heading where it meets the tines.

If we look back at the pretty shaded green example in picture 2 we see that the design represents a subtler transitional version which is less geometric than some of the later examples we shall encounter. Floral elements occupy the base of the heading, and from these the usual spoke like lines radiate outwards. They enclose openwork panels which are filled in with intricate scrollwork, softening the geometric quality and blurring the impression of speed and movement. By contrast the glitter comb in picture 3 is a much purer interpretation, with its simple unadorned raylike panels that are devoid of surface ornamentation the better to display the glittering goldstone filaments.

Picture 4 shows a classic interpretation of this design. This is a large comb in which lines radiate outwards fanwise, like the spokes of a wheel, or the sticks of an unfurled fan. In this example alternating panels of decorative openwork are placed between the spokes, adding to the sense of speed and movement. Some of the designs resemble the tops of palm trees, while others look as though they were vaguely derived from the patterns found in tribal Africa. The ornament is done in celluloid overlay with a black upper coating calendared over a lower transparent one, lending an air of delicacy to the geometric design.



Picture 4: Classic example of spokes with openwork panels

A different interpretation, known as the 'sunray' design, is seen in picture 5, whereby the radiating panels resemble formalised sunrays. This colourful and unusual ornament is also made in two layers with an upper coating of glossy black over bright red, which shows at the edges of the rays. These are done in a double layer, with alternate panels originating at the base of the heading and shorter ones placed between.

Before the end of the 19th century, people and especially aristocratic women, had carefully used hats, gloves and parasols to avoid becoming sunburned. To have a tan was snobbishly associated with the lower social classes who did manual labour and worked outdoors. However with the growth of interest in the benefits of sport and exercise, sun-bathing became something of a fetish with many younger people in the 1920s. This sunray design is believed to symbolise the popular devotion to acquiring a healthy looking tan.



Picture 5: Hair comb showing the 'sunray' design

A third type of interpretation features palm like motifs radiating out from the centre, as in example 6. This handsome and striking ornament in glossy black celluloid is in the Egyptian Revival taste, which as previously mentioned was given fresh impetus by the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1923. This event led to the use of all kinds of pseudo Egyptian motifs in the decorative arts, of which the palm leaf was one of the most popular.



Picture 6: Egyptian style comb with 'palm' motif

This iconic design of spokes, rays or palm fronds, appears again and again in hair combs of the period. Sometimes the design is perfectly symmetrical, like the spokes of a wheel or the sticks of a fan. In other examples (picture 7) the pattern is asymmetrical. This pretty ornament has the design interpreted as a series of openwork leaf like motifs or petals, with their tips inclined to the right.

This example is in celluloid faux tortoiseshell, since by now the genuine material had become very expensive. These faux tortoise combs are some of the prettiest to be found at this period. All though they were mass produced it is unusual to find two exactly alike unless they are a pair. Some of them are very convincing and difficult to distinguish from the genuine material, and are skilfully treated to imitate the brown and orange mottling of genuine tortoiseshell. These faux tortoise combs are probably made from Xylonite, a translucent form of celluloid, and were produced under trade names such as *Tortine* or *Tortoisine*.



Picture 7: Faux tortoiseshell with asymmetric interpretation of palm motif

There are seemingly endless interpretations of this type of design. Some are very geometric and formal, all angles and triangles. Others combine geometric and softer elements. Still others appear as a series of openwork loops and whorls, as in illustration 8.



Picture 8: Palm design abstracted to a series of loops

Picture 8 is a very beautiful hair comb of translucent amber coloured celluloid. Here the iconic design is abstracted to a series of five openwork loops, graduated in height like a tiara. The flowing lines are emphasized by embellishment with deep amber rhinestones in this beautiful ornament.

A Time of Giant Hair Combs

Some of the combs seen in the fashion pages of popular magazines were so tall that they resembled the mantilla hair comb or Peineta. This is the tall tortoiseshell ornament which is used to hold up the lace veil in Spanish traditional costume.

These very large combs have been captured in a number of popular illustrations. Picture 9 is one of the beautiful advertisements from *L'illustration* magazine for Maison Auguste Bonaz in Paris. One model wears a comb so large that its pointed crest appears to protrude a considerable distance from both the top and sides of the head. By contrast, the other sitter wears a very small and modest ornament, which foreshadows the development of hair combs in their next phase of Art Deco.



Picture 9: Advertisement for monster hair combs from the Bonaz workshop

The caption translates into English as;

“Whether large or small the most elegant combs are signed Auguste Bonaz”.

Picture 10 shows one of these monster combs, done in French ivory, which measures fully nine inches in height. Here we see an example of the iconic spokes which is much more complex and intricate. Arising from a vaguely Egyptian looking motif placed just above the tines is a small version of the classic motif. This is surmounted by a second version, terminating in a row of scallops and a deep intricate border of scrollwork.



Picture 10: French ivory monster comb with complex spoke-like design

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 similar to that of the second sitter in the Bonaz advertisement in picture 9.

Art Deco was now moving into its late phase, often known as Art Moderne or sometimes Streamline Moderne. The development of hair accessories during this period will be the subject for my next 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 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.