



## Spanish Mantilla Combs (Peineta)

*Part 1*

# The Romance of the Spanish Mantilla Comb

The term 'Spanish mantilla combs' is often used as a kind of umbrella category for any decorative hair comb with a high upstanding cresting that rises up proud from the top of the head when the comb is placed in position. However, the Spanish mantilla comb or *Peineta*, to give it the correct name, is rightly that comb which is part of the beautiful and traditional native dress worn in certain parts of Spain. The *Peineta* is particularly associated with the region of southern Spain known as Andalusia.

We are all familiar with this kind of *Peineta*, where the enormous cresting rises anything from eight to twelve inches above the wearers head, and supports a beautiful lace veil. In Spanish tradition white veils were worn by young and unmarried women, whereas black was favoured by older married ladies. Mourning etiquette was observed more strictly in Spain than some other countries, and older women were often required to show this respect for some deceased relative. Therefore it became customary for them to dress entirely in black when they reached a certain age, even when they were not in mourning.

## Development of the Mantilla Veil

According to the Wikipedia online encyclopaedia the mantilla is a lightweight lace or silk scarf worn over the head and shoulders, often over a high comb, by women in Spain and Latin America.

The mantilla is a garment which has a special significance in Andalusia. Its origins go back to the Iberian culture, when women used translucent veils to completely cover themselves when they went out in public. This covering up can be attributed to the Arabic influence in the region. It was called the *manto*, and a shorter shoulder length version was called the *mantilla*.

The word comes from the Spanish diminutive of *manta*, or cape. The *manta* was worn throughout Spain. However, each region adapted it to both social and physical determining factors, such as climate. In this way, for example, in the coldest areas, the mantilla was used like an outer coat, made in more substantial fabrics. In the warmer areas, mantillas were made in light and smooth weaves, making a garment more luxurious and ornamental than practical.

The translucent lace mantilla first appeared in the 17th century. The great Spanish court painter Velasquez painted several famous portraits of lovely ladies in this guise. However the lace veil was not yet draped over the high *Peineta*, but simply placed across the head and falling on either side of the face in a becoming manner. These lace mantillas were worn not only for attending church but for all occasions when an aristocratic lady went out in public. In such situations the veil was usually drawn modestly across the face to conceal the wearer's identity. However, it is clear that it could also function as a vehicle for flirtation!



Picture 1 : Portrait of the Duchess of Alba wearing a high *Peineta* and mantilla veil, painted by Goya

The translucent veil draped over the *Peineta* with which we are familiar today evolved in the 19th century among the ladies of the Spanish court. Picture 1 shows a well known portrait by the Spanish painter Goya of the Duchess of Alba, a famous aristocratic beauty of the day. We can see that she is now wearing both a high *Peineta* and a translucent black lace veil together, although the mantilla veil is not yet draped over the comb.

## The Spread of the Peinita

By the 1830s the high *Peineta* or Spanish style comb was being worn not only in Spain but by fashionable women throughout Europe and the USA. The mode at this time was for very high and complex hairdressings such as those illustrated in picture 2. This is taken from a hand tinted and engraved fashion plate in a magazine of the day called *The World of Fashion*, and dates from 1832.

We can see that the two fashionable ladies have elaborate updos which contain all manner of ornaments like flowers, feathers and great stiffened loops of hair which were unashamedly false. Supporting these great coiffures both women have high Spanish combs which appear to be beautifully pierced into complex designs.



Picture 2: Fashion plate, 1832 from *World of Fashion*, showing high Spanish style combs worn in the coiffure

There are many early portraits in the USA of ladies wearing very high backed horn hair combs, some of them cut into designs of the most amazing complexity. Others were left plain, or were decorated with naive but pretty hand painted floral designs. These horn combs are now very popular with collectors of early Americana because they are so typical of an era. Such combs were mostly hand made in small local manufactories. For many years the comb

making industry in the USA was concentrated around the town of Leominster, and there are several early accounts of this industry.

In Europe too these high combs were made in various materials such as metal, horn and tortoiseshell. The latter was the favourite material, the so called blonde variety, which is the colour of dark honey, being favoured above all others. Even at this time tortoiseshell was 20 times more expensive than horn, and most prized of all was this blonde variety.

The next three pictures show a selection of high Spanish style combs from this period which have passed through my store over the last two years.

Picture 3 shows a Peineta in the favourite blonde tortoiseshell which measures 9 inches high by 6 inches wide. This one has a beautiful lacy openwork design and is entirely hand cut.



Picture 3 : Peineta hand cut from the blonde variety of tortoiseshell

Picture 4 shows another tortoiseshell comb, but this one is solid without the openwork carving. The chief beauty of this comb is the unusual fluted design, which appears like the petals of a flower. Notice too the attractive random mottling of light orange and yellow spots upon a dark ground which is one of the most beautiful features of natural tortoiseshell.



Picture 4: Early 19th century hair comb in mottled variety of tortoiseshell

Genuine tortoiseshell has nothing to do with land tortoises but is obtained from the shells of marine turtles, notably the shell of the Hornbill Turtle. I shall not describe the incredible cruelty with which the turtles were deprived of their shells at the height of this barbarous trade. Thankfully this creature is now a protected species and the place of genuine shell has been taken by more environmentally friendly synthetics. The combs illustrated in this guide were made over 100 years ago, when political correctness and conservation of threatened species were not the issues that they are in modern times.

The beautiful honey coloured comb in picture 3 is taken from the breast plate or plastron of the turtle, which produces semi transparent material that is often called blonde for its colour. Less expensive, but just as beautiful, the mottled variety was derived from the back plates of the shell.



Picture 5: Peineta of gilt filigree, mid 19th century

Perhaps more environmentally friendly is the beautiful silver gilt filigree Peineta illustrated in picture 5. This ornament is somewhat later, and the degree of elaboration of the metal work shows that it dates from well into the 19th century. The effect of the filigree work is reminiscent of gold lace, and it must have appeared very beautiful with a lace veil draped over it.

The effect of fashionable ladies wearing these giant combs caused a great deal of mockery in the popular newspapers of the day. Picture 6 is a copy of a cartoon which makes cruel fun of them. We can see that the combs are represented as being so large that they blocked the streets, stopped the traffic, and even caused injury to other pedestrians!



Picture 6 : Early 19th century cartoon making fun of huge fashionable hair combs

The result of all this public mockery and the time and effort which went into maintaining the high and complex coiffures is that by the mid 1830s they fell out of favour. Therefore the great *Peinetas* which had helped to sustain them also went completely out of fashion for a time in non-Spanish countries. However, this was by no means the end of the fashion for the mantilla comb, which continued to flourish in the Spanish speaking lands.

## Royal Patronage for the Peineta

Isabella II of Spain (1830 – 1904) was very fond of fine lace, and she used her influence to make the lace mantilla fashionable at court. She and her ladies wore it for many ceremonies both public and private. This led to the high *Peineta* and mantilla veil being widely adopted by sophisticated city dwellers during the course of the 19th century. It was in this form that the mantilla comb and veil as we now know them became an established part of traditional Spanish costume.

The high comb and mantilla also played a part in Spanish politics in the so-called *Mantilla Conspiracy*. In 1870 Isabella was deposed, and the Cortes (Spanish parliament) decided to reinstate the monarchy under a new dynasty. The Duke of Aosta was elected King as Amadeo I in 1871, but this was a widely unpopular choice with the Spanish people. In Madrid the wearing of the mantilla was now so deeply rooted in popular tradition that it was converted into a symbol of opposition to the foreign fashions which Amadeo I and his wife Maria Victoria attempted to introduce. The protest was led by women who refused to wear the fashionable foreign hats and bonnets and instead preferred their native comb and mantilla.

Another famous lady whose fashion influence helped to popularise this graceful mode was Eugenie, Empress of the French and wife of Emperor Napoleon III. Born Eugenie de Montijo, Countess of Teba, the Empress was of Spanish ancestry. By her beauty, elegance, and charm of manner she contributed greatly to the brilliance of the imperial regime and was influential in introducing many new fashions to the French court. One of these was the ornamental hair comb and mantilla which was widely adopted by French ladies.

Meanwhile in its native Spain the use of the high *Peineta* and mantilla veil has enjoyed mixed fortunes. After 1900 its use generally declined, except for special occasions such as Holy Week and bullfights. However the mantilla has continued to this day to be worn in Andalusia and is an important part of festival costume.



**Picture 7: Spanish ladies in their traditional attire for attending church, from a painting in the 1930s**

In Holy Week it became a tradition that ladies dressed in black clothes, with a tortoiseshell *Peineta* and a black lace mantilla. These clothes were worn for visiting churches and for processions. Picture 7, which dates from the 1930s, shows a painting of Spanish ladies wearing the mantilla comb and black lace veil for church attendance.



**Picture 8: Young Spanish woman wearing the high *Peinita* with a white lace mantilla**

The famous *Feria de Abril* in Seville was also an opportunity for wearing the mantilla, and this tradition is still followed. Indeed, the Seville April Fiesta has become one of the biggest tourist attractions in Spain. One of the most celebrated sights is the daily parade of mounted

gentlemen who carry on their pillions beautifully dressed local girls wearing their native dress, complete with high comb. Older ladies and young children make the progress in horse drawn carriages. White mantillas, similar to those worn by the pretty young lady in picture 8, were also worn for attending the bullfights which are such a feature of this fiesta.

## Peinetas in Late Victorian Britain

In the late 19th century the high comb also returned to popularity in Britain and other parts of Europe with the production of Bizet's opera *Carmen* in Paris in 1875.



Picture 9: A fashionable young lady in a cabinet photo of the 1870s  
wearing the high comb in her complex coiffure

Picture 9 is taken from a British cabinet photo of the 1870s and shows a very fashionable young lady in the dress of the day. She is wearing a high mantilla style comb with an elaborate pierced openwork design in her complex updo. We can see that voluminous coiffures which required a great deal of false hair, had again returned to fashion. The Victorians loved posing for photographs and many of these portraits are valuable to the social historian for their interesting details of the fashions and hairdressing of the time.



Picture 10: Mantilla style comb of natural horn, dyed to resemble tortoiseshell, circa 1870-1900

The beautiful horn comb illustrated in picture 10 is an example of a similar ornament dating from the period 1870- 1900. This one has been dyed to simulate the ever popular and much more expensive tortoiseshell. The regularity of the design shows that it was probably pressed out in a factory and then hand finished.

Horn was one of the most popular materials for hair combs throughout the 19th century, not only because the material was cheap, but also because it could be easily treated to obtain a

number of decorative effects. It could be dyed a range of colours and was often treated to imitate the distinctive tortoise pattern of the more expensive material. This was achieved by painting it with various dyes and chemicals. Sometimes it was done with great artistry such that it is difficult to distinguish the horn from the genuine shell, particularly when two or three different colours were used.

Horn could also be clarified so as to be almost translucent. This gives it the attractive colour of honey, and is a feature of many combs of the period. It could also be carved, pierced, stamped and when heated, twisted into ornamental shapes in a plastic manner. Horn is an extremely flexible material, and when heated it can be bent, pierced and stretched into all manner of forms.

In the first part of the 19th century, the making of combs was still a handicraft, and many of these ornaments were made in small local manufactories. However by the mid century they were being produced in vast numbers by means of mechanical die-stamping. Polishing and finishing, including painting the horn with chemicals to simulate the tortoise markings, was usually undertaken in the UK as a cottage industry by women and children who were the families of the comb-makers.

These fan shaped and frequently very large Spanish style combs were worn in a characteristic manner. They were placed in the side or back of the hairdressing, often at an acute angle, and in such a way that the tall heading stood up proud by several inches. This enabled the often beautiful openwork decoration or the decorative effect which had been applied to the material, to be viewed from all angles, and for the details to be seen effectively outlined against the light. This manner of wearing the decorative comb is shown in picture 9 and many fashion plates, photographs and picture postcards of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

Towards the end of the 19th century hair styles became simpler and less voluminous. The huge combs fell out of favour, only to return with the Art Deco period of the 1920s. However that story, and the continuing tale of the *Peinita*, will be told in the second of my guides.

## **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.