

Celluloid Hair Comb from early 20th Century. The item did belong to the Cleaver Suddon collection, and the item call number is 2014.07.538 within Toronto Metropolitan University's Fashion Research Collection (FRC) Photographed by Sonali Prasad. Accession: FRC2014.07.538.



THE CELLULOID HAIR COMB AND ITS TROUBLESOME EXISTENCE

By **Sonali Prasad**
MA Fashion Student

November 22, 2019

The celluloid hair comb has a rich and troublesome history from its predecessor, ivory and tortoise shell hair combs. The environmental degradation, endangerment of wildlife, and precarious and deadly working conditions for a seemingly insignificant luxurious hair accessory has been considered worth the price tag since its invention. (Cruse 13-28). However, the significance of hair accessories was much deeper because the introduction of artificial materials during the industrial revolution made once rare, natural, and expensive goods suddenly man made, inexpensive, and to the wealthier classes' disdain made to be common and accessible to middle and working classes. This object based research will attempt to examine how extravagant hair accessories have changed throughout time. As well as the reason for the trend of the hair comb accessory dying out.

OBJECT ANALYSIS

Construction

The object is a hair comb for females constructed in the early 20th century. The main components of the object are the designed piece of green floral and leaf design, which contain blue and yellow artificial gemstones, which makes the item lightweight. The surface of the item is solid green with an iridescent shimmer while the underside is green with a yellow discolouration to it. The other main component of the piece are the four prongs which are intended to be fixed into the wearer's hair. The prongs are smooth which indicates that the item has no functional purpose to hold the hair in place but rather add further adornment to the wearer.

Materials

The object is made of celluloid and contains artificial gemstones. Cellulose is an artificial material, commonly referred to as celluloid, was discovered in 1838, and was originally used as a polymer, and a common substitute for ivory and tortoise shell (Matthews David). The first common artificial gemstones were made of glass, however with the discovery of artificial materials, plastic gemstones became more common, like the ones within this hair comb.

Use and Wear of the Piece

The hair comb is a decorative element intended to be added to styled hair both natural, and wigs. The item is slightly discoloured on the underside, a gemstone has fallen out, and there are tiny scratches on the prongs.

HISTORICAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Wealthy Hair Trends

When determining the birth of a fashion trend, the root cause can often be narrowed down to the emulation of celebrities and royalty depending on the trend and time period one examines. There is a reason for this, and it has transcended through time for as long as fashion and dress historians can trace back. Through her analysis of hats and dressing practices Charlotte Perkins Gilman (61-71) she determines that people have this implicit drive within them to exude desirability and wealth through their dress. Specifically, through garments and pieces that are stylish, unique, and most importantly distinguish one from others who might have the same ambitions as your own (Perkins Gilman 62-63). Some of these ambitions are most often than not tied to socio-economic gains such as marrying above one's own class within the Edwardian period. Within a postmodern society it could also mean convincing others of higher qualifications through the comfort of perceived wealth.

HER MAJESTY QUEEN MARY.



Queen Consort Mary of Teck, 1893.
Unknown Photographer.

In regards to the hair comb itself, members of the British Royal family have been seen wearing elaborate and ornate hair combs, some of which are classified as tiaras, such as Queen Consort, Mary of Teck (Queen Elizabeth II grandmother). The hair comb, although a small accessory, allowed the wearer to add an element of luxury and opulence to their dress through visible embodiment. Hair combs, according to Jen Cruse have around for about 500 000 years, appearing since the stone age, through antiquity, till modernity (14 - 30). Hair combs in their original manufacturing were hand made by artisan comb makers which allowed for a unique and detailed piece which took anywhere from several weeks to several months to make (Cruse 54). Artisan comb makers started to emerge around the medieval period and existed until the 19th century (Cruse 21-28). Unique combs allowed for distinction for the wearer and high artistic appeal of the comb itself, and was not limited to the perception of wealth once placed within an elaborate hairstyle accompanied with one's best outfit.

MANUFACTURE FRANÇAISE DE PEIGNES : AUGUSTE BONAZ

171, rue du Temple - PARIS
Usines : OYONNAX (Ain)



Hair Comb advertisement
for Auguste Bonaz comb
factory in Oyonnax,
France, 1919. Artist:
Marcell Fromenti

However, well into the long-reigning popularity of hair combs the second industrial revolution allowed for the mass production of goods which was not limited to garments and accessories (Cruse 48-51). Machine-made hair combs allowed for a greater production of hair combs, but the popularization of artificial materials from natural and endangered materials allowed for a greater accessibility to a growing middle class, and working class to afford once extravagant and luxurious hair accessories in different styles and soon were not limited to just purchase one piece due to the low costs. However elements of artisan craft still remained in manufacturing process such as the comb factory Oyonnax, France as discussed by Alison Matthews David such as the molding and gemstones which would have to be placed in by hand. The ability to exude a perception of wealth, luxury, extravagance, and desirability was becoming easier for middle and working class people, much to the disdain of the wealthy.

November 15

The world of jewelry accompanying a gold metal dress gown includes a diamond head-band, diamond earrings with pearl drops, a pearl and jade necklace, and diamond and enamel rings. The gown from *Barry*! *Goodman*, for *John* *Thorne*



Stylized Hair

JEWELLERY FROM *BARRETT* *WOMEN*
BY *FRANCIS* *BARRETT*

A HAIR'S LENGTH SEPARATES PAST and PRESENT

AMERICAN women, firmer than Europeans, because desirous of short hair, and, for the past season, they have been making strenuous efforts to acquire sufficient length of hair to meet the demands of the new European coiffures. With long tresses an accomplished fact, aided by the help of nature or the skilful transformation, the women of fashion may choose for her style of hair-dressing any one of the several types that are now sanctioned by the mode. But, in making her selection, she must always bear in mind the style and silhouette of her costume, which is not always the same for all hours of the day. For example, for the morning in the city, or for that matter, in the country, too, she will pre-

Smooth Rippling Coiffures

Expose the Ears and Coil

At the Nape of the Neck

CHIFFONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS
BY *MARY*

fer to wear a small snug hat which demands a very particular style of hair-dressing. The American woman prefers a softer treatment of the hair to frame the face under the morning or sports hat, than does the Parisienne, and she will therefore not dress her hair, for this occasion, in a *Coiffure*, slicked back into a large chignon, as she would arrange it in the evening, but wear it rather soft and soft, concealing the ears harmoniously. She would do well to remember, however, that for the morning hat, though the style of hair-dressing may appear informal, the hair must always be neat, smooth, and *coiffure* if the woman is to be harmoniously attired and look really smart. For the afternoon, and for the evening, of course,

Vogue article about the new hair trends. (Vogue, 1922, p. 39 photographer unknown.)

Yet a negative consequence to mass produced hair combs were that machines simply could not produce the detail and unique, one of a kind pieces compared to artisan makers. Losing a key, implicit element of dress – the desire to be unique from others – was a contributing factor to the slow death of this hair accessory. However, the final hit in the death of the hair comb was first wave feminism and the abandonment of old generational feminine ideals and the popularization of short bob hairstyles with the new adult generation in the 1920s and 1930s (Matthews David 198, Cruse 53).

Deadly Manufacturing

It is no secret within fashion studies that often than not that the manufacturing of goods is outsourced to countries with little protection for workers, resulting in precarious work environments. Notorious cases include the 2013 Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh which had a death toll of over 1100 factory workers, with no compensation for the victims' families nor severe criminal liability for the owners of the factory (Akhter 135). Another example would be the practice of sandblasting, which in unregulated places such as Bangladesh do not require, nor enforce, the wearing of protective gear when sandblasting denim for intentional distress and softening. The consequences of sandblasting for the worker is silicosis which is when small particles of dust and sand are embedded within the lungs (The CDC). This results in shortness of breath, coughing, severe weight loss, chest pain, is fatal accompanied by a slow, painful death for those affected and still remains incurable (The CDC).

However, precarious working conditions, disregard for workers seen as disposable, and the fashion industry's willful ignorance of such practices has been in fruition since the industrial revolution and utilization of synthetic materials.

This hair comb in particular is made from a synthetic substance commonly known as celluloid. The introduction of celluloid in manufacturing is infamous due to its tendency to combust if exposed to heat. As examined by Alison Matthews David, the manufacturing of celluloid goods had entailed numerous deadly factory fires and explosions causing mass casualties of workers in precarious working conditions. Often, these workers were immigrants exploited by their employers such as the case of the Robert Morrison Comb Factory fire in New York in 1909 which resulted in nine deaths, five of whom were Italian immigrants (182). Countless other deaths occurred as a result from celluloid from the wearers of celluloid pieces and garments, as well as the retailers.

Celluloid had gained popularity for synthetic goods due to its natural counterpart being ivory and tortoise shell, which was increasing in price because of the endangerment of elephants and tortoises. Yet a positive element for manufacturers was the inexpensive costs to make celluloid products resulting in an inexpensive price tag for the consumer driving sales. Despite the risks of working with celluloid and the danger it put workers in, the manufacturing of celluloid in dangerous environments continued until safeguards could be implemented, such as the requirement of sprinkler systems in 1919 for workplace safety and non-flammable materials such as cellulose acetate (Matthews David 198, Cruse 54).



Robert Morrison Comb
Factory Fire, Brooklyn
December 1909. Photo
By Lewis Hine. (Matthews
David 183).

In conclusion, this object analysis has determined that the reason for accessories, let alone extravagant ones, come out of trend and die out is due to their loss of appeal for their inability to provide the wearer a sense of style and uniqueness. Automation and industrial manufacturing contributed to this lost sense of uniqueness because of mass production, as well as the devastating effects that celluloid manufacturing had. However, the end of celluloid goods did not end because of the risks and dangers it posed to workers but rather the discovery of a similar, conveniently less dangerous, less expensive material of cellulose acetate. One has to wonder despite celluloid endangering workers over a hundred years ago, why workers continue to be endangered and neglected for the convenience and style of Western consumers, and what it will take to rely on sustainable and equitable manufacturing.

Here is a link to my creative component illustrating the evolution of hair trends since the hair comb since the Victorian Era. It displays the various reasons, influences, and appeals that hair accessories come into style.

<https://prezi.com/view/o7l8H9TwLmEAAqf58sx/>

WORKS CITED

Akhter, Shamima. "Endless misery of nimble fingers: The Rana Plaza Disaster." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*. Vol.20, no. 1, 2014. pp.137-147.

"CDC - Abrasive Blasting- NIOSH Workplace Safety and Health Topic." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 26 Apr. 2011, <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/blasting/>.

Cruse, Jen. *The Comb: Its History and Development*. Robert Hale, 2007.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Dress of Women*. Greenwood Press, 2002.

Matthews David, Alison. *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present*. Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2015.