Some Comb Forms of the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries

MAIREAD DUNLEVY

Although hair fashions have been changing for centuries—and perhaps with the same frequency as at the present day—the styles of combs have altered very slowly. Single-sided combs, or combs with teeth on one side only, were made in pre-dynastic Egypt\(^1\) and in the Montelius Phase II Bronze Age Period in Scandinavia.\(^2\) This form of comb was developed by individual cultures and remained the most popular type of comb until about the third century A.D. Single-sided combs continued to be used, but their popularity waned a little, during the fourth to tenth centuries, and again during the twelfth to eighteenth centuries A.D.\(^3\)

Double-sided combs, or combs with teeth on two sides, may have been developed by either the Assyrians or the Greeks,\(^4\) but the style gained in popularity under the Romans who then spread the fashion to other European countries. The influence of the Vikings repopularised the fashion for single-sided combs for a time, until the double-sided horn comb became fashionable in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. Some of the popularity of the horn comb may have been due to the fact that it was a single-piece comb, unlike the composite forms which had been in general usage. These new single-piece combs could be manufactured quickly, almost mass-produced. The double-sided type also was fashioned in other materials, and remained popular until the mid-nineteenth century when combs were moulded in factories.

Because combs have usually been considered as essential articles for the private toilet, we rarely find them illustrated or commented upon in contemporaneous documents. It may be of interest, therefore, to look at the forms of combs which have been most frequently illustrated and documented, those of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, although few combs of this period have yet been found in archaeological excavations.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

Holme — Randle Holme, The Academy of Armory or, A Storehouse of Armory and Blazon, Chester 1688
L.G.M. — The London Guildhall Museum.
N.M.I. — The National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.
V. & A. — The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

\(^1\) Ash. Mus., 1895-942 and 937, Ox. 53 from Grave 1586, Nagada, Egypt, dated to about 3644 B.C
\(^3\) I wish to offer thanks to the Keepers and staff of the various museums whose collections I have examined, and especially to Mr. Norman Cooke and the staff of the London Guildhall Museum, and to Mr. Brown of the Antiquities Division, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. I also wish to thank Mr. Etienne Rynne, University College, Galway, who read and helpfully commented on the script.
\(^4\) The Connoisseur, Dec. 1952, p. 170. F. V. Winter, Die Kämme aller Zeiten, Liepzig 1886, Taf. II.
Probably one of the most important documents in the study of combs of the period under review is The Academy of Armory or, A Storehouse of Armory and Blazon, by Randle Holme, published in 1685 at Chester. This was published only thirty-three years after the comb-makers received their first Charter as a London Livery Company. Holme listed the materials used in the manufacture of combs. These included boxwood and cocuswood, horn (of oxen and cows), ivory, bone (shanks of horses and other large beasts), tortoiseshell, and an imitation tortoiseshell made of stained horn. Lead combs were made for those who had red hair: "to make it of another colour." He also listed the various types of combs that were sold in the second half of the seventeenth century.  

"The Horse or Mane comb, a strong wood comb with a thick back. The Wiske comb, have teeth on one side, and are wide and slender. The Back tooth comb, having teeth but on one side. The Beard comb, a small sort of comb, almost four square. The double comb, two combs clasped into the other. The Merkin comb. The periwig comb, having round open and strong teeth. The smalltooth comb, having teeth on both sides, one side wider than the other." On analysis, if this list is taken in conjunction with Holme's definition for head and hair combs and with the combs which are extant to-day from this period, we find that there were three main categories of combs in use at that time. It is proposed here to call these categories Classes H, J and K.

**Class H:** 
(Pl. V, 1 and 2) 
(Pl. VI, 1)

A strong double-sided comb with lentoid cross-section. There is a row of fine and a row of coarse teeth on either side of the thick central ridge. Comb ends may be convex, concave, straight or shaped. Undecorated Class H combs appear to range from about 10 cm. to 27 cm. in length, by 7 cm. to 18 cm. in depth and over 1 cm. in thickness. Beard combs are usually miniature Class H combs and are about 5 cm. to 4 cm. in length, by 3 cm. to 5 cm. in depth and 6 mm. to 7 mm. in thickness. No comment is made on Beard Combs below as few have been found in dated contexts, and because they are merely miniature forms of Class H.

**Class J:** 
(Pl. V, 2)

Double-sided combs which are thin and flat in cross-section. Comb ends are either straight or elaborately shaped. Although teeth are usually fine and very closely cut, one row usually has teeth cut slightly wider than the other. Class J combs occur in ivory, bone and wood. They average in size about 9 cm. in length, 8 cm. in depth and 4 mm. in thickness.

---

4 Holme, p. 13.  
7 Ibid., p. 12.  
4 In an as yet unpublished thesis, Aspects of Toilet Combs found in Ireland (Prehistoric to the 17th century), submitted as a M.A. thesis to the National University of Ireland (Dublin), the present author classified combs from Ireland. Classes A-G (inclusive) are single-sided and double-sided combs used until the late 14th/15th century, or until Classes H, J, and K combs became popular.
Class K: (Pl. VI, 2) (Pl. VII, 1)

Single-sided, usually single-piece, combs with wide strong open teeth. This class can be subdivided into combs which have high spines for decoration or for the attachment of decorative panels, and those which have narrow spines. Class K combs occur in bone, tortoiseshell and wood, and can vary considerably in size.

Some undecorated Class H combs bear similarities to the undecorated, double-sided wooden combs of the Roman Period. They differ in that they are lighter in weight than the Roman-type, and are longer, rather than square or vertical in shape as are most Roman specimens.

Highly decorated Class H combs in wood or ivory are known. The decoration by painting, carving or inlay, must have been the work of highly-skilled craftsmen. For example, there are beautifully carved toilet and liturgical combs of ivory, dating from the ninth to the sixteenth century, showing finely carved romantic and biblical scenes. Other ivory combs of this class bear richly carved mottoes as, for example, the fifteenth century ivory fragment from Hockwold, Norfolk, and a similar comb in the Thetford Museum, Mildenhall. Wooden combs with carved and inlaid decoration are also highly-skilled pieces of work. They are frequently about 27 cm. long by 18 cm. deep. The pierced quatrefoil patterns, the numerous and unessential small bronze rivets, the inlay of small ivory triangles of bronze or of shaped green-tinted bone, all made up a complicated, beautiful and, presumably, expensive comb. Some bear mottoes, such as POUR DIEU, which might suggest a liturgical purpose, while the motto MENEZ MOI DOUCEMENT—Guide me gently—on a sixteenth century comb could suggest that it was used as a love token. A comb bearing the coat of arms of Louis XII of France and Anne of Brittany has two concealed sunken compartments suitable for locks of hair, cosmetics, pomander or some such objects. The finely carved wooden comb attributed to Marguerite of Flanders, Duchesse of Bourgogne, is probably also a comb made for secular usage (Pl. VI, 3). Based on historical and artistic form, a late fourteenth to sixteenth century time-span is generally attributed to these decorative combs.

Apart from these examples, decoration on Class H combs seems normally to have been quite frugal. Horn combs are frequently undecorated or have simply two incised parallel lines at the base of each row of teeth, or similar incisions forming a parallelogram on either face of the central ridge of the comb. Horn combs of this form are known from High Street, Dublin (12th to 14th centuries), the Frisian Terps (14th century), and London Wall (16th to 17th century).

---

1 For example, one from Silchester now in Reading Museum and Art Gallery.
2 A. Goldschmidt, Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Romantische Zeit, Berlin 1926, Taf. XII, 23.
4 Goldschmidt, op. cit., Taf. LXIII.
5 University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, Reg. No. 48, 2402.
8 The Cosmeisier, Dec. 1962, p. 175.
10 I am grateful to Dr. G. H. S. Bushnell, Cambridge, for this information.
11 I am grateful to Mr. A. B. Ó Ríordáin, National Museum of Ireland, for this information prior to publication.
Undecorated Class H combs of wood, in all of the various end forms, were in common usage during this period. There are straight-ended examples from excavations and stray finds in London (15th to 17th centuries),\textsuperscript{21} from Ledaig Moss, Argyllshire (17th century),\textsuperscript{22} Beverly Minister, Yorkshire,\textsuperscript{23} and Ennagh, County Kerry (c.18th century).\textsuperscript{24} Convex-ended wooden combs have been found in Oxford (14th century),\textsuperscript{25} and shaped-ended combs in Lime Street, London (15th to 16th centuries),\textsuperscript{26} and from the River Colne, Upper Colchester.\textsuperscript{27}

Class H combs have been illustrated in contemporary works. Of these the most noteworthy include the late fourteenth century Apocalypse Tapestries,\textsuperscript{28} the Luttrell Psalter (1435-1470),\textsuperscript{29} and contemporary paintings such as those by Alessandro Tiarini (1577-1668),\textsuperscript{30} William de Poerter (c.1640)\textsuperscript{31} and Domenico Fiasella (c.1589-1669).\textsuperscript{32} This type of comb is also seen on the mermaid panels which are found on the walls of a number of abbey and churches throughout Ireland (15th/16th century),\textsuperscript{33} and on some late seventeenth century dishes and plates.\textsuperscript{34}

The horn combs seem to have heralded the return to fashion of the double-sided single-piece comb. The elaborate late fourteenth century comb of Marguerite, Duchess of Bourgogne, is obviously at an advanced stage of the development of this form. From the evidence quoted above, Class H combs seem to have been commonly used from the 13th/14th century, were very popular during the 15th century, and were used up until the late 17th/early 18th century, by both the aristocracy and populace.

From the fragments that we find extant, and from Holme’s descriptions, we can say that Class J combs were double-sided, single-piece combs with close fine teeth. Class J combs were made of ivory, bone, and sometimes of wood, and were so thin that decoration by painting and superficial carving was the only possible method of ornamentation.

Class J combs from London, (Cheapside,\textsuperscript{35} Old Bailey,\textsuperscript{36} and Lime Street,\textsuperscript{37}) are dated by associated material and delkware to the mid-seventeenth century, while another finely painted Class J comb has been tentatively associated with the sixteenth century Augsburg toilet-box.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{21} e.g., L.G.M., Reg. No. 21104, from Blossoms Inn Extension, London.
\textsuperscript{22} Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot., 10 (1875), 82.
\textsuperscript{23} The Yorkshire Archaeol. J., 5 (1879), 131.
\textsuperscript{24} E. A. Shee and M. J. O’Kelly, J. Cork Hist., Archaeol. Soc., 71 (1966), 86, fig. 1, pl. V.
\textsuperscript{26} L.G.M., Reg. No. 21361, E.R.87.
\textsuperscript{27} Ash. Mus., Reg. No. 1927-6511.
\textsuperscript{28} The Whore of Babylon.” These tapestries have been dated to 1373-1379 A.D.
\textsuperscript{29} Fol. 63 and V. 70. E.M. Mss. 42130.
\textsuperscript{30} e.g. “Il Giuramento di Semiramis” Palazzo Doria, Rome.
\textsuperscript{31} e.g. “The Robing of Esther,” The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.
\textsuperscript{32} e.g. “Rinaldo e Armida,” Palazzo Bianco, Genoa.
\textsuperscript{33} For example, the mermaid panel at Kilcolhy Abbey, Urlingford—\textit{cf.} Lord Killanin and M. V. Duignan, \textit{Shell Guide to Ireland}, 2nd edition London 1962, p. 449.
\textsuperscript{34} e.g. earthenware plate by Thomas Toft, Staffordshire, c. 1675—\textit{cf.} W. B. Honey, \textit{European Ceramic Art}, London 1949, pl. XXII.
\textsuperscript{35} L.G.M., Reg. No. 21696.
\textsuperscript{36} L.G.M., Reg. No. 24395.
\textsuperscript{38} Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Reg. No. N.M. 7325, Cat. 531.
Undecorated Class J combs are illustrated in paintings by, for example, Tintoretto (c. 1560) and Edwaert Colyer [late 17th century]. This comb form was used by the City of Paris as a silver mark for the years 1768 to 1774. Class J combs, therefore, seem to have been popular between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Single-sided, Class K combs were normally made of horn, ivory, bone or wood. The Class K category can be divided into two groups. The first group is that with broad crests to which a decorative plaque could have been attached (Pl. VII, 1). An Italian boxwood comb of this form, with silver-gilt frames set with cabochon gemstones, has been dated to the sixteenth century. Such combs may have been the precursors of the "Spanish" or "Josephine's" combs which became popular in these islands during the early nineteenth century. Two combs of this form are known from Ireland, one from Blessington, Co. Wicklow,44 and the other from Ballinderry Bog on the border of Counties Westmeath and Offaly. Unfortunately, no dating purposes, both of these combs were chance finds.

Combs of the second group have such narrow crests and coarse teeth that they resemble many of the combs in use today (Pl. VI, 2). A comb of this second type was found with an ale licence of c. 1700 A.D. in the New College muniments at Oxford. Plain combs of this form are illustrated by, for example, Colyer (late 17th century) where it is associated with a Class J comb46 and by Charles Forrest (1774). The City of Orleans used this form of comb as a silver mark between 1784 and 1791. Highly decorative Class J combs of this form are known, as, for example, that associated with the Augsburg toilet-box (16th century). We also find this form of wide-toothed comb mentioned by Sir Walter Scott just before 1800, where he refers to "the king's redding kaim," i.e., the readying comb, or comb used to prepare the king's periwig.

Class K combs could be seen to be a development of the twelfth or thirteenth century single-sided comb, especially the decorative type with pierced side-plates which display bronze interplates. behind them. Class K combs seem, therefore, to have been used between the thirteenth/fourteenth century and the late eighteenth/nineteenth century.

* * * *

Randle Holme has clearly shown that in the sophisticated society in the late seventeenth century combs were made for particular reasons: there were combs to

---

42 The Connoisseur, August 1970, p. 270, no. 3.
44 In a private collection.
45 National Museum of Ireland, Reg. No. Wk. 313.
48 Les Poincages de Garantie, p. 147.
49 W. Scott, Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, Edinburgh 1812, p. 357.
50 S. Grieg, Middelalderske Byfnd fra Bergen og Osle, Oslo 1933, fig. 181.
comb the whiskers, the beard, and the periwig; strong combs were used to disentangle hair, and fine-tooth combs were used to remove nits. The Class K combs may have been occasionally worn for decoration in the hair, but bodkins were the usual artifacts used to keep hair-arrangements in place.

Class H, J and K combs may be said to be developments of combs known in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Other combs existed which have not yet been recognised in modern collections and illustrations. Such a comb is the lead comb mentioned by Holme which was used to make "their hair black" and which caused Jeremy Taylor, in 1660, to reproach their users with the warning that "Clemens Alexandrinus is as severe against old men that with black lead combs put a lie upon their heads".51 Despite their use to prolong youth, these combs were found to be a source of lead poisoning, thus hastening the opposite.

51 Holme, p. 13.
2. Fragment of Class H comb (wood).
(Photo: London Guildhall Museum)

3. Class H comb (horn).
(Photo: London Guildhall Museum)
1. Highly decorated Class II comb (wood) of Marguerite, Duchesse de Bourgogne.  
(Photo: Musée de Cluny, Paris)

2. "Still Life", by Edwaert Colyer (1682–1702), showing an ivory Class J comb and a tortoiseshell Class K comb with narrow spine.  
(Photo: University of Glasgow)
1. Class K comb (horn) from Blessington, Co. Wicklow — decorative panels would have originally been fixed to the high spine.

(Photo: A. Reynolds)