

Feature



In Remembrance: In Love – Victorian Hair Jewelry **Kathy Fox**

Although foreign to our modern sensibilities, Victorian men and women often wore jewelry made with hair as tokens of remembrance and affection. An exhibit at San Jose State University's Beethoven Center shows examples of this art form.

“Whose hair I wear, I love most dear” is an old adage that can help to explain, as much as anything can, the curious fashion of hair jewelry—items that are made from or contain strands of a loved one’s hair. This type of jewelry was made for the purpose of



Hand painted miniature 1790(?). Portrait of male with small window on revers enclosing lock of hair. 4” x 3”.

remembering a deceased loved one, or a dear friend, child, wife, husband, or a lover. Pieces were also made and exchanged for sentimental reasons, as tokens of affection.

Many civilizations throughout history have believed that hair holds a sacred quality and that it retains something of the essence or soul of the person it came from. Hair is also virtually imperishable (take your time before remembering to clean a bathroom sometime!) and was viewed in certain cultures as symbolic of immortality.

Keeping a lock of a loved one or deceased person’s hair was equivalent to preserving a portion of that person. This is a rather old fashioned notion to the modern way of thinking that keeps death at arms length. Nowadays, a parent might snip a



Framed hair art, 1812. Mourning scene with weeping willow overhanging tomb. Made with hair clippings and pulverized or powdered hair. 6” x 6”.

lock of hair from a child before a first hair cut to remember that moment in time for the same purpose.

The widespread use of this type of jewelry began in Europe in the seventeenth century with the custom of distributing mourning rings that contained strands of the deceased’s hair. The custom grew in the eighteenth century to include rings, brooches, and little scenes in the neoclassical style of the day that usually included a tombstone and perhaps a weeping willow tree all of which were actually made of the loved one’s hair (above).

It was England’s Queen Victoria that further defined 19th century mourning customs in both England and America. The Victorian Period ran from 1837-1901 and even though Americans were not under British rule, they still looked in the direction

of England for guidelines in matters of both fashion and etiquette. The English conventions for mourning were much stricter than those in America, and the circumstances of the Civil War made those practices even more lenient.



Gone with the Wind mourning dress design. Walter Plunkett, 1939.

Mourning usually entailed three phases. The first, deep or “full mourning” lasted a year and a day and required the widow to dress entirely in black for the entire period. No jewelry was allowed. She was also expected to restrict her social life, no social activities with the exception of church attendance. After the initial month had passed she could receive visitors at home; previous to that time she was to remain in seclusion. At three months, it was acceptable to attend a narrow scope of social engagements but she was still expected to be attired in black.

Widowers, on the other hand, were still permitted to go about their everyday business even in deep mourning. They were expected to wear a simple black suit and a black armband. If the man had small children, he was encouraged to remarry as soon as possible to provide them with a new mother.

After a year and a day another nine months was considered “second-mourning.” This period lasted nine months and outfits now could have contrasting and lighter

colored trims. Jewelry, in particular mourning jewelry, was allowed by convention. “Half-mourning” followed and individuals now could dress in costumes be made of purple and gray materials.

Examples of jewelry made with hair can be dated back to at least the 1600's, when both men and women gave hair bracelets as love tokens. Hair jewelry stayed popular until the late 1800's. During this time period the hair was usually placed in a brooch that had a small cut-glass covers that framed the hair.



Earrings containing hair, and matching brooch c. 1860(?). Each piece 1" x 1/2"

The hair was also used as a background for initials or a personal symbol to the wearer.



Rose gold pin, 1830(?). Lock of plaited hair and fine gold wirework initials “B.L.” 3/4" x 3/4".

Hair was valued for sentimental reasons at a time when there were no photographs. Young girls kept scrapbooks of their schoolmate's hair, usually with a name and verse to go with it identifying whose hair it was. Adult friends often exchanged lockets that contained a lock of hair.

Although mourning jewelry has been produced for nearly two thousand years, it reached its peak in Victorian England at the latter half of the 19th Century. The art reached its height in American popularity during the Civil War. During the Civil War as the soldiers left home to join the fight, they would leave a lock of hair with their families. Upon the soldier's death, the hair was often placed in a locket and became mourning jewelry.



Hair locket mourning brooch c. 1837-1910. Center compartment contains closely woven fine lock of brown hair. Tiny pearls symbolize tears. 1-1/8" x 7/8".

Collection Methods

Other than cutting their hair women collected hair from their hairbrushes. The hair was removed from the brush and placed in a receptacle, called a hair receiver, which

sat on the dressing table. They were usually made from ceramic, bronze or crystal.



Receiver for hair from brush c. 1890,, with hand-painted old roses on rim and lid. A mainstay of a Victorian era dressing table. 3" x 4".

Once enough hair had accumulated, it could be woven or plaited and put into lockets, or made into watch chains, bracelets or other jewelry.

Hair Work Methods

The work was done on a round braiding table 32 to 33 inches in height that had a hole in the center; an example is on the right. Depending on the height of the table, it could be done sitting or standing.

Preparation of the hair was important for ease of working and a good finished product. The hair was boiled in soda water for 15 minutes. It was then sorted into lengths and divided into strands of 20-30 hairs. Most pieces of jewelry required long hair. For example, a full size bracelet called for hair 20 to 24" long.



Table work: The bundled strands of prepared hair were tied with fine linen thread. The thread was then attached to a long slender bobbin similar to the one shown at the left. The opposite ends of the hair were gathered and attached to a counterbalance weight; an example is to the right, which hung down through the central hole in the table. The strands were then spread from the center over the edges of the table ready to be braided.



This produces either a hollow tube or solid length (depending on the method used) of woven hair that was used to make necklaces, bracelets, or watch fobs and could also be formed into decorative brooches and earrings. Hair was grouped into three or four strands and those strands were attached to a heavy bobbin to keep them taut and straight. The strands were woven in various patterns to achieve the wanted pattern. When the work was finished and still around the mold, it was taken off, boiled for 15 minutes, dried and removed from the mold. It was then ready to be formed into the finished piece.

Hair flower wreaths:

Another form of hair work is the hair flower. These are formed by "stitching" the hair with fine wire over a rod that forms a series of loops that are then

formed into different flower shapes. Most of the hair wreaths were formed into a horseshoe shaped wreath that was placed on a silk or velvet background inside the frame.



Victorian table-worked bow pin with acorn drops, c. 1831. Hair braided over stick; stick removed to mold hair into bow. 2" x 2".

When memorial wreaths were made, hair was collected from the deceased and added to the wreath whenever anyone died. The top of the wreath was always kept open suggestive of ascending heavenward. It was said that the newest addition would be placed in the center, and then moved to the side to become part of the large wreath when the next person passed away.

Palette work: "Cut work" or "palette work" is done by laying the hairs flat and up against each other, then gluing them to a base similar to tissue paper. When dried,



Brooch containing light colored palette-worked hair, surrounded by pearls, symbolic of tears. 1-1/4" x 1".

shapes are cut out, formed into a pattern and glued. This produces a very delicate type of art that is usually placed in a brooch or pendant type setting.

The fashion for all mourning jewelry came to an end at the turn of the 20th c. with the death of Queen Victoria, the onset of World War I, and the increased freedom for women. Women also began to wear their hair shorter so there was a scarcity of raw material.

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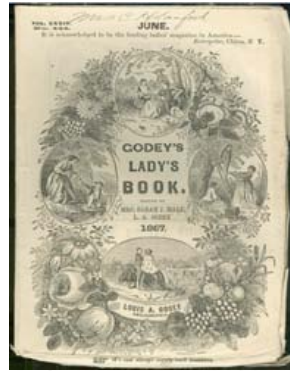
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Kathy Fox is curator of the exhibit, "In Remembrance: In Love; Jewelry of Sentiment. Victorian Period Hair Jewelry, 1790-1920". She has been Administrative Assistant for the Ira F. Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies since 2004. Kathy received her M.L.I.S. From San Jose State University in 2006. Visit the Center [web site](#) for information on programs and hours.

About the Exhibit

The Ira F. Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies was established 25 years ago when Ira Brilliant gave his collection of Beethoven letters and first editions to San Jose State University in California, with the promise that a Special Collection would be established and built around those items.

Twenty-five years later, the collection



has grown to 25,000 plus items. The highlights of the collection are 350 first edition scores, nine Beethoven letters, 4,700 books and periodicals, a wide variety of art objects, and many

Beethoven artifacts. Perhaps the most requested object to view is the Guevara lock of Beethoven's hair. It was snipped by Ferdinand Hiller on the day after Beethoven's death March 27, 1827.

"In Remembrance: In Love" presents many examples of hair work jewelry from the collection of the Ira F. Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies. All the pieces on display are all handmade from human hair. The other pieces pictured are not made with Beethoven's hair.