

Donation of the Month

Hair Work Jewelry

From Top Left: 1995.83.1; 1980.16.2; 1998.12.114; 1998.12.115
Donors: Katharine Villard, Eunice Ann Baker, Stephen Leflar



The art of hair work is a strange and fascinating craft. Although hair work dates back to earlier times, it became especially popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Besides knitting, crocheting, and netting, hair work was a fashionable hobby for ladies. Commonly crafted objects were pins, earrings, bracelets, brooches, necklaces, watch fobs, and even purses. Most often, these objects were mementos of loved ones that could be worn or carried. Many were made as mourning jewelry from the hair of a loved one who had died and were worn in memory of the deceased. Queen Victoria was said to have worn a piece made from her husband Prince Albert's hair when he died in 1861. Hair jewelry grew in popularity in America during the Civil War. A husband might have worn a watch fob or had a framed lock of hair close

to him during battle. A wife or sweetheart might have worn a pin in honor of her soldier.

Hair work was a fine craft and there were several techniques. Three popular applications of hair work were woven jewelry, flowers and wreaths, and lockets and brooches. The four pieces featured here are woven jewelry pieces from the museum's collection. The top left piece is a mourning pin made of woven tubes of hair attached to a metal hand which holds a heart made of hair and metal. At the top right is a woven hair watch fob. You can see the ends of the hair coming out of the weave. The bottom left pieces are woven hair earrings. The bottom right piece is another mourning pin; the back is engraved with "Father & Mother" and was probably worn in memory of the deceased parents. Many pieces like these were made using a braiding table. Weighted sections made up of strands of hair were hung from the center of a rounded surface and then woven together according to the chosen pattern. Although there were special tables and frames for this craft, some women created their own using an old flat-top hat or bandbox. Whatever surface was used needed to be smooth to keep the hair from tearing or pulling apart and ruining the design.

The art of hair work eventually lost its widespread popularity but many historic pieces like these give us a glimpse of this fine craft from the past. For more information on hair work, the following sources provide details on techniques, history, and artists who do hair art today.

CREDITS

Harran, Jim and Susan. "Remembering a Loved One With Mourning Jewelry," from Antique Week, December 1997 accessed at <http://www.hairwork.com/remember.htm>. Victorian HairWork Society website accessed at <http://www.hairworksociety.org/>. Haug, Joanne, editor. "Victorian Hair Work," accessed at <http://www.victoriana.com/Jewelry/hairjewelry.php>.