

Reviving Mourning Culture: Status in Victorian Mourning Material Culture and Its  
Resurgence

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my fiancé, Jason, who always accompanied me on all my research adventures. Thank you for getting me where I needed to go to acquire artifacts for my private collection and the hundreds of books on Victorian Death culture. Mom and Dad, thank you so much for allowing me to pursue my passion with continuous support. I also dedicate this work to all those who are navigating through their grief, no matter how long it has been.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **REVIVING MOURNING CULTURE: STATUS IN VICTORIAN MOURNING MATERIAL CULTURE AND ITS RESURGENCE**

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This thesis investigates the concept of Victorian Mourning Culture and how its resurgence has initiated new conversations about status and material culture. Material culture, or the study of objects through a social historical lens, helps scholars and other researchers properly situate these objects into proper context. This research thesis discusses changes of social conventions and material culture and introduces the stages of mourning. Specialized clothing and jewelry were created specifically for the display of the stages of mourning. These aspects of material culture provide a visual analysis of a range of styles of Victorian mourning jewelry and discuss the significance of mourning artifacts. Museums have created recent exhibitions on Victorian Mourning culture and 21st century scholars. Artists still utilize the same methods from over a hundred years ago when creating hair jewelry based on the practices of Victorians. This has created a resurgence of Victorian Mourning culture in contemporary society. The information

collected for this thesis was gathered from the primary and secondary sources on Victorian mourning culture. The purpose for this research is to highlight the everyday practices of a forgotten culture who chose to embrace all aspects of the natural occurrences of death and mourning.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING VICTORIAN MOURNING CULTURE**

During the Victorian era, a desire for the newest fashion trends encouraged women to update their way of dress frequently. However, there were times when clothing was needed for a more specific purpose: to reflect the loss of a loved one, whether it be her husband, child, or parent. An upper- or middle-class woman's wardrobe was expected to change during the period of mourning, as she was expected to display an outward expression of her grief.

Through the mid-to-late nineteenth century, artisans crafted complete wardrobes with curated jewelry to assist Victorian women with their grieving. The wardrobe consisted of all black clothing, which visually signified a woman's loss and her newfound status as a widow or grieving mother. The color black was a concrete indication that the woman had officially entered a mourning period. To gain a better understanding of the purpose of mourning culture and why it held immense significance in the Victorian era, it is essential to examine historical context for mourning culture, gender, class elements, and how this culture has manifested itself through visual elements in dress and accessories.

The discourse on Victorian mourning culture provides material evidence in understanding how from the nineteenth century until contemporary times, humans have approached the concept and reality of death and dying. Not only did the influence of how

the Victorians approached death revolutionize the western viewpoint of mortality, but it also created a prosperous world of material culture following the emergence of Victorian mourning culture. The practices and mindset that surrounded Victorians in the United Kingdom also spread to the United States and has made an everlasting effect on how Americans also approach the subject of death. From Victorian England to contemporary society, the commercialization of death culture is still quite relevant. It is also important to understand that the surviving artifacts of Victorian mourning culture that exist today are mostly from upper class and upper-middle-class families. These two classes would have had the ability to keep and preserve the mementos of their deceased loved ones.

#### **“THE GOOD DEATH”**

Although the concept of mourning culture itself has become an idea of the past, the ideals and practices are still much utilized today. Funerals, for example, in the Victorian period were parade-like, creating an elaborate procession that was meant to represent the ultimate devotion to the deceased.<sup>1</sup> Crowds gathered as the procession traveled down the streets, the deceased being escorted in a coffin that rested in a luxurious lined interior within the funeral coach, or hearse. Horses led this carriage, much like a standard carriage for basic transportation. The transparent glass windows on all sides of the hearse allowed onlookers to view the coffin and flowers left by loved ones of the deceased. The design of the hearse itself was created to publicly display the deceased in an opulent manner. Of course, these types of funerals were monetarily reserved for the

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<sup>1</sup>Yurie Nakane, "Fashioning Death: Victorian Market of Mourning," *The Journal of the Asian Conference of Design History and Theory*, (No. 3, 2020) 31.

wealthy, as a procession this extravagant cost a lot of money. Elaborate funerals ensured that the deceased received what is known as a “good death,” which in the Victorian era, meant that the individual in an evangelical manner, was in good standing with God and that the individual made their peace with God and their family.<sup>2</sup>

Scholar Yurie Nakane discusses in her article, “Fashioning Death: Victorian Market of Mourning,” that,

“The commercialization of death appears to have occurred based on respect and bereavement for the loved one. However, Victorians came to find such values in their consumer activities related to mourning. From an examination of the three mourning customs, it is possible to identify a shift in Victorian mourning customs towards commercialization.”<sup>3</sup>

In just three sentences, Nakane encompasses a vital development that has its origins in mourning culture in the Victorian era. It appears that at first, the rituals of having elaborate funerals and dressing in mourning clothing ensured proper respect and mourning of a deceased loved one. As time proceeded, the rituals became more commercialized, and the focus of importance shifted from mourning loved ones to ensuring a proper social status within Victorian society. The commercialization of specific clothing, accessories, and funerary customs not only brought mourning culture into the spotlight of material goods, but also created a whole new target market and consumer culture.

Factors such as social class and identity played a significant role in mourning culture. The popularity of mourning clothing and accessories became an indicator of

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<sup>2</sup> “Morbid Curiosity.” National Library of Scotland. Accessed March 9, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Yurie Nakane, “Fashioning Death,” 31.

social status and proper etiquette, as well as a way for women to display their wealth. It is also important to discuss the significance of how material culture relates to mourning culture in Victorian society. Material culture, or the study of objects produced or used by humans in society, can help us understand how specific items of dress and adornment are heavily woven throughout Victorian mourning culture.

### **HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF VICTORIAN MOURNING CULTURE**

The beginning of mourning culture dates back significantly to before the Renaissance; however, while its meaning has remained constant throughout the centuries, its physical and visual manifestations have changed over time. Lou Taylor's book, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History*, comments on the purposes of mourning culture. Taylor states that, "Widows and mourners were a group cut off from the rest of society, physically isolated by virtue of their bereaved status."<sup>4</sup> In order to physically and visually separate widows and mourners from the rest of society, a key element of appearance needed to be altered: the clothing. Taylor provides insight into various purposes that mourning clothing served during the periods up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Taylor claims that,

"Mourning clothes served several purposes: they indicated the piety and chastity of the wearer; they denoted the wealth and social status of the bereaved family. As royal funeral etiquette filtered slowly down through the class system, widows became a perfect shop window for an impressive display of social expertise."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress (Routledge Revivals): A Costume and Social History* (Routledge, 2009), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 65.

Since the emergence of mourning clothing, social status has always played a crucial role in how societies perceive the bereaved. According to Taylor, it is “from the Renaissance onward the sumptuary laws governing mourning dress in general (and widows’ weeds in particular) grew into an intricate labyrinth covering choice of fabric, color, cut, and accessories.”<sup>6</sup> These aspects of mourning make their way into the very essence of mourning clothing and culture into the Victorian era, where social status and class play a crucial part of one’s identity. The Victorian era is the period of an expanding consumer culture, especially in Britain, where the ability to afford finer things in life becomes popular in the everyday lives of well to do members of society, and the upper and middle classes can indulge in the nicer material items, even while mourning the death of a loved one. Scholar Yurie Nakane comments on the commercialization of mourning culture and how the social practice of mourning became a justified reason to splurge on material goods. Nakane states that, “Victorians became wrapped up in inflated ideas about mourning. They considered the lavishness conferred upon death to be a kind of reward for the deceased’s ante-mortem achievement.”<sup>7</sup> By justifying lavish spending on mourning goods, the upper and upper middle classes created a specific demographic for the growing consumer culture in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

The social status of the wealthy is not the only shift occurring during the Victorian period, but the whole attitude around death shifts during the Victorian era. In the United Kingdom and the United States, during the nineteenth century, there was a

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 65.

<sup>7</sup> Yurie Nakane, “Fashioning Death,” 31 .

growing cultural concern about mortality. Multiple social and historical factors led to the increased interest in exploring death and the hereafter. Changes in the treatment of illness and the preparation for burial led to this increased preoccupation with death, as a result of loved ones of the upper- and middle-classes dying in hospitals and their bodies increasingly being retrieved by morticians. The removal of the dead from the home created social anxieties as the deceased were no longer prepared for eternal rest at home. The creation of funeral parlors replaces the home's parlor where the bodies of the deceased were initially placed for viewing.

This upheaval of normality surrounding the process of managing the death of a loved one caused significant anxiety for people during this period. Instead of the immediate family handling the body of the deceased loved one, an individual outside of the home and family was now expected to perform those duties.<sup>8</sup> These anxieties also extended into the use of hospitals as well. Many of the times before, the family tended to the sick family member and if it was the end of that individual's life, then they passed away in the comfort of the family home. New methods concerning end of life care and the transition into death initiated Victorian society's growing fascination with death and their own mortality.

As several factors threatened the well-being of the Victorian population, including very visible epidemics of infectious diseases like cholera, as well as other factors like industrialization and urbanization, people felt the most reasonable response was to

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<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Mitchell, "Death Becomes Her: On the Progressive Potential of Victorian Mourning," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41 (2013).

incorporate death culture into their everyday lives. The most prominent way that Victorians expressed social anxieties about death and dying was through their clothing and accessories, specifically those that were developed for mourning the loss of a loved one. The use of mourning clothing and accessories eventually led to the creation of specific warehouses for these types of textiles, which will be further explained within the chapter.

### **SOCIAL CONVENTION AND MOURNING**

Scholarship on the social convention of mourning culture points out that the initial creation of mourning attire developed as a progressive interpretation of the “black dress,” thus shifting viewpoints of society. In Rebecca Mitchell’s article, “Death Becomes Her: On the Progressive Potential of Victorian Mourning,” Mitchell writes that once an upper- or middle-class woman’s husband was deceased, the woman had control over the finances. This allowed her to spend freely on her mourning attire, creating a more elaborate mourning identity.<sup>9</sup> Mitchell utilizes a social historical method to analyze Victorian women’s lives after the loss of a husband.

Another scholar, Deborah Lutz, in her article, “The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture,” discusses the creation of hair jewelry, which contained the hair of the deceased loved one. These pieces of jewelry emerged in the mid-1800s and were fashioned into brooches, necklaces, and bracelets

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<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, “Death Becomes Her.”

that the surviving individual could wear as a memento.<sup>10</sup> Victorian ornate hair art gained popularity among upper-and middle-class women, where they commissioned jewelry and other forms of hair art created from their deceased loved one's hair and displayed it on their bodies or in the home.

Sophie Renken discusses the performativity of mourning, stating that, "As well as being fashionable, it conveyed the 'proper' emotions in the face of death, evincing emotional refinement and compliance with middle class ideals. The object's fundamental sentimentality was recognizably emblematic of the individual's sophistication, signaling to the world a level of taste and sensitivity that formed a crucial part of the performance of middle-class identities."<sup>11</sup> Renken situates her thesis on the concept that jewelry utilizing human hair is associated with middle-class ideology, and can be seen as a way to construct the middle-class identities it claimed to express.

Lutz focuses on the visual analysis of Victorian mourning objects and utilizes an iconographic method to discuss various motifs used in creating mourning art from human hair. Both Mitchell and Lutz provide solid evidence that the creation of mourning fashion and ornate hair jewelry shifted the perception of death in the Victorian era and initiated a cultural movement now defined as "Mourning Culture."

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<sup>10</sup> Deborah Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39 (2011).

<sup>11</sup> Sophie Renken, "The Performativity of Hair in Victorian Mourning Jewelry," *The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture*, June 4 (2021): 19.



## **TASTE, CLASS, AND IDENTITY FORMATION**

As with any society, social factors and material culture played a role in the creation of social norms. In this case, it was the social norms of proper mourning for upper-and middle-class women. During the 19th century, the social ritual of mourning played an immensely significant role in Victorian life. The participation in mourning the death of a loved one consisted of visual indications that an individual, especially a woman, was expected to communicate through clothing and accessories.

During the Victorian era, mourning customs became newly significant among the upper-class and it was believed to be socially unacceptable to question those customs. Only a very few select individuals might speak out against the rigorous standards of mourning customs. Social convention eventually made upper class women well supplied with mourning dresses, as it was improper for a woman of such social standing to be without them in her closet.<sup>12</sup> Middle class women also followed mourning etiquette, but only strictly enough for what their budget allowed. It is important to understand that mourning clothing was worn by every person who could afford such materials. Victorian society, specifically the elite, viewed the act of mourning as a social performance that visually indicated who was a decently bred member of society. This did not only include communication of social status through clothing, but also accessories as well.

The influence of mourning clothing and accessories mostly came from the Queen, who provided an immense amount of social influence on popular culture. Individuals,

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 122.

particularly wealthier women, felt as though they needed to emulate Queen Victoria in their mourning practices. This was important as she was known for her elaborate mourning attire that she continued to wear after the death of her husband until her own death in 1901. Queen Victoria's fashion choices, dispersed through illustration in women's magazines, increased demand for mourning fashion and accessories. Her influence was so prominent that it resulted in dress shops creating sections for ready-to-wear mourning clothing. However, the Queen's influence did not end with clothing. Queen Victoria also initiated the popularity of "jet," a black stone that was found along the shores of Whitby, England. This natural stone was fashioned into jewelry specifically for the Queen and was eventually reserved strictly for mourning purposes.

### **STAGES OF MOURNING**

Mourning attire has been documented since before the 16th century, but held more prominence in the 19th century, as it socially and more significantly, visually distinguished individuals from the daily crowd. Individuals who were in mourning mostly wore all black clothing, made from various dull materials, as this was viewed as the appropriate way to dress for mourning the loss of a loved one.

As with other heavily socially structured aspects of Victorian life, the ritual of mourning also consisted of specific etiquette, which included "proper" clothing and accessories. There were also specific periods over the course of mourning during which a changing assortment of colors was expected to be worn, providing evidence that

mourning clothing did not only consist of black clothing, but also dark plums and grays as well.

The anticipated timeline for mourning varied for women depending on whether she was mourning a husband, a child, or other loved ones. If a woman's husband died, she was expected to mourn for two years. The loss of a husband required strict regulations for the new widow. The course of grieving involved various stages of mourning dress. "Heavy mourning" consisted of dull black clothing and a crepe silk veil. Next followed "first mourning," which consisted of black clothing that was trimmed with white crepe collars and cuffs.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, the cycle concluded with a "secondary mourning" period. During "secondary mourning," women were able to incorporate muted colors such as mauve, purple, and gray into their clothing.<sup>14</sup> The process of dressing in mourning gradually lessened as the widow eventually resumed her social life. Widows were held to the highest expectations for mourning the loss of their husbands, as they wore the most elaborate of mourning outfits, for longer periods of time. Scholar Lou Taylor, writes in his book, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History*, that women were expected to remain in their mourning clothes for a substantial part of their lives. This was because during the 19th century, women were viewed as a "showpiece," to be a living display of their family's wealth and respectability, of which was the main foundation of a woman's life.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Briony D. Zlomke, "Death Became Them," *The Defeminization of the American Death Culture, 1609-1899.* (2013) 42-73.

<sup>14</sup> Zlomke, "Death Became Them," 42-73.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 136.

Men had to make fewer changes to their attire, with the ability to wear lesser mourning attire over the course of their grieving period.<sup>16</sup> Men were only expected to remove any type of gilt buttons and buckles, or anything else that would provide a glimmer effect to their wardrobe.<sup>17</sup> Men also wore their mourning cloaks to funerals during the 19th century; this wardrobe staple later evolved into shoulder sashes that were fashioned from white or black crepe fabric.<sup>18</sup> The indication that a man was in mourning lessened until all he wore was a black armband along with his normal, everyday attire.<sup>19</sup> The use of the armband was the most prominent way a 19th century man outwardly displayed his mourning period.

Unfortunately, the heavily structured system of mourning was difficult to navigate because the specific time frames for each stage of mourning were interpreted differently depending on the individual. Indicating the precise time frames in which a stage of mourning occasionally varied from person to person, placing more social stress for women on the proper etiquette for mourning.<sup>20</sup> This confusion inspired authors to create etiquette books, which included mourning etiquette, that explained how to properly dress for each stage of mourning.<sup>21</sup> Books such as *The Lady*, *Lady's Pictorial*, and *Ladies Year Book*, consisted of articles and examples focused on mourning attire and the various styles that were available to them.<sup>22</sup> One of the most well-known women's books was

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 128.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 128.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 134.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 134.

created by Louis Antoine Godey in 1830. Titled, *Godey's Lady's Book*, this book was a compendium of everything a woman could utilize to remain updated with the period's latest fashions, including mourning attire and the proper order in which to wear such clothing. *Godey's Lady's Book* contained images called fashion plates of upcoming clothing trends and proper methods of styling such outfits.<sup>23</sup>

### **MOURNING DRESS AND TEXTILES**

For Victorians in England and the United States, changes in the social norms and rituals surrounding death led to the manufacturing and creation of clothing and ornately crafted jewelry that continue to fascinate art historians and historians today. The need for mourning clothing and accessories became more prominent as upper-and middle-class women intended to not only use mourning attire to outwardly mourn their loved ones, but also create a statement of social class and identity, specifically in a visual manner. Mourning clothing and jewelry were manufactured not only for personal grief, but also as a public way to express social standing within Victorian society.

The need for mourning did not discriminate when it came to financial background, as mourning was an unavoidable aspect of Victorian life. There were strict guidelines regarding the types of fabrics that could be utilized in the creation of mourning clothing. The fabric could not have any type of shine or gleam, so this meant that any fabric used in mourning clothing needed to appear dull.<sup>24</sup> Any type of dull fabric such as bombazine, a fabric originally made from silk or both silk and wool, and crepe existed

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<sup>23</sup> Godey's Lady's Book. Philadelphia, Pa.: L.A. Godey.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 128.

strictly for mourning and were frequently used in the manufacturing of mourning clothing.<sup>25</sup> The need for mourning clothing gained such prominence in the Victorian era that textile manufacturers decided the best opportunity to sell mourning clothing was in mourning warehouses. Also referred to as “Maisons de Deuil,” these “mourning warehouses” provided everything that was needed for a socially appropriate funeral.<sup>26</sup> One of the largest and most well-known warehouses, Jay’s London General Mourning Warehouse, housed everything needed for a proper funeral. Established in 1841 by William Chickall Jay, this business housed not only proper mourning clothing and accessories needed for grieving loved ones, but also sold various funerary commodities that loved ones purchased for their recently deceased.

The various materials used in the creation of mourning clothing externally communicated the class identity of those in mourning. For wealthy customers, fabrics utilized in mourning clothing were made of silk crepe material or a fine material known as Henrietta cloth. For the lower classes, individuals created garments out of any matte textile, such as cotton or wool, which was available to them. Pre-existing garments or fabrics that had already been purchased would have to be dyed black for the occasion.

Many of the fabrics used, such as silk crepe and Henrietta cloth, were expensive materials to purchase. By having the ability to own dresses made from these materials, a woman could display her high social status and inferred her “proper breeding.”<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 128.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 189.

<sup>27</sup> Sonia A. Bedikian, "The Death of Mourning: From Victorian Crepe to the Little Black Dress," *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying* 57, no. 1 (2008): 35-52.

ability for middle-to-upper-class women to spend on expensive clothing and jewelry reserved for mourning created an identity for the “woman in mourning,” and placed her in a high social ranking within society.

Women in mourning, specifically widows, were expected to wear plain black dresses, and could accentuate their outfits with black and white accessories.<sup>28</sup> When they needed to travel outside of their home, especially during the early stages of mourning, widows were expected to wear black bonnets and cloaks, as well as long black veils made of crepe fabric that would cover their face. Every aspect of the woman’s wardrobe was adjusted to reflect a period of mourning, even articles of clothing that were hidden from the public. Women’s undergarments would also reflect a period of mourning. The chemises, drawers, and under petticoats would be “slotted” with black ribbon.<sup>29</sup>

### **MOURNING JEWELRY AND ACCESSORIES**

The necessity to participate in the act of mourning did not conclude with clothing. Objects such as jewelry and headwear were often utilized to emphasize mourning dress. Lou Taylor addresses the three major functions for mourning jewelry:

“First, it functioned as a souvenir of the deceased, seen in some cultures as an open reassurance to the departed spirit that it had not been forgotten. Secondly it was made as a *memento mori*, a reminder to the living of the inevitability of death. The third function always present but subtly updated in mourning etiquette was that of status symbol dressing.”<sup>30</sup>

Although these three reasons for mourning jewelry all have significant roles within the social practice of mourning, the first reason, being a token of the deceased, is the most

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 129.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 136.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 224.

prominent reason for the creation of this jewelry. Various pieces of jewelry were fashioned from an intensely personal material from the deceased, their own hair. The use of the deceased person's hair provided a tangible object for the loved ones to keep close to their hearts, sometimes quite literally. Hair was tucked into lockets, pendants, and brooches and worn as a memento of their loved one.<sup>31</sup> Bracelets, key fobs, rings, and earrings were also created, so the remaining relatives could bring a piece of their loved ones with them wherever they went. Mourning jewelry using the medium of hair became popular for Victorians, so they utilized this custom to create works of art utilizing the hair of the deceased loved one.

Also known as “ornamental” hair jewelry, the hair was fashioned into flower patterns or other imagery, such as weaving patterns. The flower pattern represented “forget-me-nots,” a delicate blue flower associated with death and remembrance during the Victorian period. The hair was woven into wearable art that held a deeply personal significance for its owner. The creation of ornamental hair art was not reserved specifically for jewelry, as many women had their loved one's hair created into wall art to display in their homes. Ornamental hair jewelry was initially perceived by scholars as everyday jewelry, yet it demonstrated an intimate relationship between the surviving individual and the deceased. The height of popularity utilizing hair as an art medium surfaced in the 1860s and was used as a specific medium in creating mementos for surviving loved ones.

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<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 224.



Of course, human hair was not the only material used to create mourning jewelry; semi-precious stones and pearls were used as well. Women would wear jewelry consisting of black stones such as jet and onyx that would be faceted into gold settings on rings, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. In numerous examples of mourning rings and brooches, small pearls known as “seed pearls” were inlaid around the black stones or the transparent glass “window” of the brooch. Occasionally, mourning jewelry consisted of a pendant that had an “in memoriam” scene created on the face of the pendant. In one specific piece of mourning jewelry, a bracelet created with strands of seed pearls fastened to a medallion pendant, shows the image of two urn tombstones situated underneath a willow tree. This iconography is often associated with mourning jewelry, and the tombstones have the initials of the deceased etched on the front of them.<sup>32</sup> The use of specific jewelry reserved for mourning purposes continued to support the idea that the need for a completely different wardrobe added to the stress of social pressure of the 19th century.

#### **THE VICTORIAN INTRIGUE OF HUMAN HAIR AS A MEDIUM**

One of the most important questions that need to be examined is “why does the craftsmanship of hair jewelry situate itself predominantly within the Victorian era?” The use of hair in jewelry did not originate from this era, but specifically in the sixteenth century.<sup>33</sup> However, though it had emerged hundreds of years earlier, today the medium of hair jewelry is most strongly associated with the Victorian era. The increasing

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<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *Mourning Dress*, 226.

<sup>33</sup> Sophie Renken, "The Performativity of Hair in Victorian Mourning Jewelry," 2.

fascination with death within the 19th century created a concrete affiliation with hair worked accessories and the Victorian era. It is understood that the correlation between hair worked accessories and the Victorian era is situated within the prominent social concept of a sentimental society.

In a recent article on mourning rings worked with hair, Sophie Renken explains that “The exchange of hair is the most conspicuously performative process in the formation of hair-work. Whether exchanged for use within jewelry or not, in life or in death, this action was highly significant within the context of Victorian Britain.”<sup>34</sup> The act of giving hair as a sentimental gift was a symbolic element that bonded people together. By giving such a personal object as hair, the Victorians believed this represented a literal piece of the person remained with them. Victorians believed that keeping a physical remnant of the deceased was a method in keeping their memory alive. Renken also states that, “when hair was exchanged between individuals, it was seen as giving oneself, in a tokenized form.”<sup>35</sup> By “giving oneself,” meaning that a personal artifact such as hair or a part of someone’s self to another loved one, represented a permanent bond that remained strong even after death. Another factor that needs further development is the reasoning behind the use of one’s hair in the creation of these pieces of art. Renken provides an intriguing commentary in her article, stating that,

“Hair is a very long-lasting and malleable form of matter. It maintains its aesthetic qualities even after it is separated from the body and can be easily reshaped and contained. It has

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<sup>34</sup> Renken, "The Performativity of Hair in Victorian Mourning Jewelry," 4.

<sup>35</sup> Renken, "The Performativity of Hair in Victorian Mourning Jewelry," 4.

remarkable endurance, saved from the impact of death from the moment it is cut from its owner.”<sup>36</sup>

Renken examines this idea further, continuing her claim that, “[Hair] is a substance that struggles to be categorized, lying at the junction between binary oppositions: ‘life and death, subject and object.’ This duality means that, though inanimate, it is very much tethered to life. It grows directly from an individual’s living body and is thus unique and unrepeatable...it can be felt to capture the ‘essence’ of a person, something of their own unique and unrepeatable nature.”<sup>37</sup> The use of hair as a medium is significant because it represents a physical piece of a person that was once alive. By utilizing a physical piece of a once living person and creating a personal memento to honor them, this eternalizes their memory. This was an important aspect of mourning culture in the Victorian era, keeping the memory of deceased loved ones alive. The use of hair to eternalize an aspect of an individual did not begin and end with death.

It is important to understand that the use of human hair in jewelry and other objects during the Victorian era was not limited to only mourning pieces. Sentimental pieces of hair work were created to friendship pieces as well as to commemorate the bond between a mother and child. The use of another individual’s hair in jewelry and other mementos could also signify a bond between friends or any other intimate relationship. For example, a locket could house the hair of two best friends, one woman’s hair intricately placed within one side of the locket, and the other woman’s hair in the other. As Renken states above, the significance of owning a personal memento such as the hair

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<sup>36</sup> Renken, "The Performativity of Hair in Victorian Mourning Jewelry," 11.

<sup>37</sup> Renken, "The Performativity of Hair in Victorian Mourning Jewelry," 11.

of someone else created a symbolic bond that was immensely treasured in Victorian culture.

The creation of hair jewelry and art not only helped create a sense of personal connections between the grieving and the deceased, but it also created a market for mourning jewelry that utilized a different medium than semi-precious stones and gold. The use of human hair in jewelry was a widely accessible material that was utilized in numerous ways. Hair is a “free” medium that can be simply braided and kept in one’s pocket, or it can be intricately embellished with seed pearls and fine metals, such as gold. This also allowed people from every social class to have something made either by themselves or specifically a hairwork artist, whichever their budget allowed. The use of hair in mourning jewelry became a mainstream form of mourning art as well, which created an immensely popular market for those who wished to not only adorn their bodies with the hair of their deceased loved ones or friends, but also the inside of their homes as well.

## CHAPTER TWO

### VICTORIAN HAIR JEWELRY - VISUAL ANALYSIS

The use of the term “Victorian Hair Jewelry” is often found in the scholarship of material culture of the nineteenth century. Many individuals believe that these objects are an echo of the past, but do not realize that Victorian hair jewelry has made an imprint on the discourse on mourning culture. The use of human hair in the creation of jewelry and other mediums held its prominence in the nineteenth century, when the interest of utilizing a material so personal to commemorate loved ones became popular. It is the consistent preoccupation with death and the hereafter that brought the use of hair to the surface of mourning fashion accessories.

As with any new emergence of fashion, there are several types, styles, and materials that were utilized, specifically as a way for the wearers to outwardly display their class and wealth. Materials such as gold and other precious gemstones were utilized to not only look “beautiful,” but indicate a higher social status, yet still serve the purpose as mourning jewelry. Many people of the upper and middle classes instructed that their memorial jewelry be embellished with finer materials such as gold or semi-precious stones such as garnet and seed pearls. Many pieces of hair jewelry were commissioned, and jewelers were sent locks of hair from the bereaved to fashion into stylistic designs, including golden brooches or lockets. Hair that was weaved or braided by hand using a method referred to as “tablework” was completed by artisans that specialized in human hair jewelry.

Not only did the wealthy participate in adorning themselves with the hair of their deceased loved ones. Working class people also outwardly displayed their grief and mourning by wearing homemade brooches or lockets containing the hair of the deceased. Since people of the lower classes did not have the resources to commission their own piece of mourning jewelry, much of the time they sent the hair to a family member who had the ability to fashion the hair into simplistic braids or weave patterns for the bereaved to keep close to themselves. If there was not a previously owned locket or brooch, the hair was placed into a small family photo album or in another secure place for safekeeping.<sup>38</sup>

Victorian hair jewelry is one of the most everlasting remnants of the Victorian era. Although various classes of people practiced the ritual of keeping locks of their deceased loved one's hair, scholars have noted that the pieces that have successfully survived are the jewelry items that were previously owned by individuals from the upper and middle classes. The beneficial aspect of these objects surviving for over one hundred years is that scholars can analyze the jewelry in person, which allows for an in-depth examination of the quality of artisanship that existed during the period. Another beneficial aspect of these objects surviving for so long is that scholars and collectors have access to objects linked to the upper- and middle-class people of the Victorian era. The survival of these objects, specifically those of the wealthy, reflects the quality of material

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<sup>38</sup> Helen Sheumaker, "'This Lock You See': Nineteenth-Century Hair Work as the Commodified Self," *Fashion Theory* 1, no. 4 (1997): 421-445.

(i.e., gold, and precious gemstones) and the various means of preservation allowed by the owners of these artifacts.

Individuals of the Victorian period, as with everything else, did not only wear hair jewelry for mourning purposes, but also as decorative pieces of fashion. It is crucial to understand that the wearing and making of hair jewelry, mainly among women, gained momentum as a popular ornamental fashion piece that was eventually depicted in manuals, pattern books, and periodical literature.<sup>39</sup> These examples of literature support the idea that women purchased memorial pieces not only for mourning purposes, but because of a general interest in fashion as well.<sup>40</sup> As artisans and other craftsmen provided their services to create such pieces, women purchased and commissioned pieces of hair jewelry so they could adorn their bodies with indications of wealth and status. Scholar Shu-chan Yan argues in her work, “The Art of Working in Hair: Hair Jewelry and Ornamental Handiwork in Victorian Britain” that, “practices of hair-work were productive and creative within the ideology of domesticity, equipping women for modern living and marking their engagement with commodity culture, including professional hair-work services.”<sup>41</sup>

Over the course of time, scholars and historians have shifted their focus towards material culture in the Victorian era but have often left mourning material culture out of the discussion. As the interest in analyzing the discourse of material culture in the

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<sup>39</sup> Shu-chuan Yan, “The Art of Working in Hair: Hair Jewelry and Ornamental Handiwork in Victorian Britain,” *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 12:2 (2019), 123-139.

<sup>40</sup> Yan, “The Art of Working in Hair,” 123-139.

<sup>41</sup> Yan, “The Art of Working in Hair,” 123.

Victorian period has resurged, a shift in researching hair jewelry and its relationship to mourning culture has also increased. This has led to the reintroduction of Victorian hair jewelry into scholarly analysis in the twenty-first century, intriguing today's scholars as it did over one hundred years ago.

Collectors and historians have invested their time and money into obtaining these intriguing pieces of history. The fascination with Victorian mourning culture has grown in momentum over the past few years, reviving the interest in hair jewelry and art that was created during this period. Not only has an interest grown, but now scholars and collectors are not only interested in the objects themselves, but research and analyze them as objects of status in the Victorian upper and middle social classes. The persistent question surrounding these objects can be generalized as such; "what can the materials that are used in the creation of these handcrafted pieces say about the people that owned them?" This question can be incorporated into the visual analysis of various hair jewelry and art objects of the Victorian era.

The use of human hair was not the only material utilized in the creation of Victorian mourning jewelry. Materials ranged from bog oak to fine metals and semi-precious stones. Although some of the materials used might have been of cheaper quality than gold or pearl, the artisanship was often just as intricate. To provide mourning accessories to people of the middle class, pieces of pressed horn or bog oak were utilized to create elaborate brooches and other pieces of jewelry that could be purchased more inexpensively but still project a fashionable design. Bracelets that were handcrafted with human hair varied in style and design as well. The prominent design for a bracelet was a



cuff style that clasped closely to the wrist of the wearer.<sup>42</sup> These bracelets were created by utilizing a weaving method that would create a sturdy cuff style, which fastened with golden clasps.

The visual analysis of Victorian hair jewelry can be divided into multiple parts. Not only did the physical look of the objects matter, but the way the objects were displayed must be considered. Mostly, hair was created into wearable objects such as jewelry and watch chain fobs, but there were also instances when hair was a medium used to create works of art that were displayed in the home. Hair wreaths and palette worked hair art was also a used method in creating a visual keepsake for a deceased loved one. While the smaller objects such as jewelry could be worn in public as an outward expression of mourning the loss of a loved one, larger pieces such as wreaths and palette worked hair art was only displayed in the privacy of the home. This allowed families to create a sacred space within the home that could be used as a place one went to for contemplation and/or remembrance.

The first step of analysis is determining the basic form of the object. Hair was utilized in the creation of several types of adornments worn to commemorate a loved one, including brooches, necklaces, bracelets, watch chain fobs, earrings, and rings. The plethora of styles made it possible for not just women to wear a memento of their loved ones, but men as well. The second step of visually analyzing Victorian hair jewelry is determining the method in which the object was created. This can include utilizing a

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<sup>42</sup> Maureen DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry* (Schiffer Pub., 2004).

method called “table-working,” which is like the creation of lace. Strands of hair are fastened to small bobbins that are hand braided into patterns to create necklaces, bracelets, and watch chain fobs. This type of technique was occasionally utilized for creating hair patterns in rings as well. For brooches and pendants, hair was either simply braided or cut into shapes that were glued to a “canvas” that served as a background for the piece. This type of work is referred to “palette worked” hair objects.

The third step of visually analyzing Victorian hair jewelry is looking at the motifs that were used in the object’s design itself. For example, some of the motifs used are hands, forget-me-nots, pansies, and stylistic curls, all common motifs utilized in mourning jewelry. Another stylized motif more frequently utilized in the creation of brooches was the use of love knots, which symbolized the forever binding of love between two people, whether it be lovers or close friends.

In this section, I provide examples of each type of object and discuss in-depth the visual analysis for each object. Each analysis will follow a pattern of the most basic form and end with an in-depth discussion of the specific objects. A variety of objects will be discussed; including an example of a highly ornate piece of hair jewelry to more basic designs that are present in hair jewelry and art. Each object will also be discussed in terms of which social class would have owned each item, which maintains the important aspect of how social class and status played its role in the discourse of Victorian hair jewelry.



**Figure 1 "In Memory Brooch," and Reverse side of brooch showing black enamel surrounding black onyx Prince of wales Curls. Source: Private Collection**

The first object included in this analysis is an 'In Memory Of' mourning brooch that utilizes many mediums. The images above show that not only human hair was used, but fifteen karat gold and semi-precious stones as well. The front side of the brooch is an oval shape with a cross-shaped layer on top with a gold inscription that says, 'In Memory Of.' Although 'In Memory Of' brooches were common, this brooch stands out in its design. Centered in the middle of the onyx stone set in the middle of the brooch is a seed pearl, which represents tears shed for the deceased loved one. Another interesting aspect of this brooch is that it has a reverse side, which displays intricate hair work under a glass window that is worked into a specific pattern called the 'Prince of Wales Curl.' The Prince of Wales curl is a stylistic design that mimics the plumes of feathers and was a popular method of curling after 1850.<sup>43</sup> These three pieces of curled hair are tied together using gold thread and are embellished with four seed pearls. It is also worth noting that at

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<sup>43</sup> Lyndon Fraser and Julia Bradshaw, "Any Relic of the Dead is Precious: Nineteenth-Century Memorial Jewelry at Canterbury Museum," *Records of the Canterbury Museum* 34 (2020): 63-84.

the top of the brooch, there is a golden jump ring attached. This additional feature of the brooch was either added on later so it could be worn as a pendant, as the original brooch pin clasp is still present.

Mourning jewelry that is created with these materials and intricate hair work reflects the amount of wealth that people in the upper and middle classes acquired during the Victorian era. Materials such as gold and semi-precious stones were affordable to people that had disposable income. The need for ornate jewelry was a status symbol of material wealth, which became widely popular among the most elite of Victorian society. Not only did the jewelry communicate the status of wealth but included more intimate meaning for the owners of the jewelry itself. The following analysis of an ornately designed mourning ring provides a fine example of this motif.



**Figure 2 Unusual "Snake" ring created for the memory of a child. Glass bezel surrounded by seed pearls. The underside of the ring which has the name of a five-year-old child. Plaited brown hair behind glass inscription, "Sophia Smith, Ob 3 April 1827, at 5 years." Source: Private Collection**

This piece of mourning jewelry is created with the motif of snakes, which is rare for the purpose of memorial. The use of snakes in Victorian jewelry was a common motif to represent eternal love, which was more popular in wedding jewelry or other precious tokens of love. The gold snake frames a small glass bezel, which contains plaited brown hair, which is surrounded by an outline of seed pearls. The use of the snake imagery is a style that is generally associated with the idea of eternity; this is why snakes were prominently used in wedding jewelry or pieces that symbolized everlasting love.<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that after Prince Albert gifted Queen Victoria a ring with a snake swallowing its tail, more famously known as the ouroboros design, the use of snakes became more fashionable.<sup>45</sup> This eventually led to the use of snakes to represent memorial and sentimental bonds. This rare example of mourning jewelry might have been created to represent that the child was an everlasting symbol of the couple's marriage, which is why they decided to create a memorial piece for their daughter utilizing the snake motif. This ring is another example of finery that the upper and middle class could afford, especially as the rarity of a snake motif on a piece of mourning jewelry had to be specifically ordered. The individual who requested this ring be made had to be familiar with jewelers who were experienced enough to create such an intricate motif from gold. This ring is a surviving example of the artisanship and money that was spent to create such an extraordinary piece of mourning jewelry.

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<sup>44</sup> DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*.

<sup>45</sup> DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*.

The inscription on the underside of this mourning ring indicates that this precious token of remembrance is for the memory of a little girl, Sophia Smith, who died at the age of five years old in 1827, predating the Victorian period by a decade. Since this ring is an example of Victorian mourning jewelry, it is probable that this ring was later commissioned for her mother as a memento for the remembrance of her daughter. As for the personalization of mourning and sentimental pieces that were created specifically for a loved one, often the imagery that was chosen could also have personal associations. Although these types of stylistic choices are not always apparent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, objects like this one that combine common and uncommon motifs help show us the complexity and variety of these objects.

Many pieces of mourning jewelry were created using braiding or weaving patterns that were placed behind a glass bezel that was then set in gold. As expected, these pieces cost a significant amount more than pieces that were made exclusively from the hair of the deceased loved ones. The next set of examples are created by strictly weaving the hair into shapes, and then adding gold accents to make them wearable as jewelry. The artisanship behind these pieces of jewelry is immensely intricate and skillful, leaving scholars with a sense of intrigue whenever one encounters such pieces.



**Figure 3 Hair work earrings in an acorn motif, 1850-1870. Source: Private Collection**

The earrings pictured in *Fig.3* are created using the table-worked method. The hair was worked around wooden molds, which were then removed after the weaving of the hair was completed.<sup>46</sup> The motif used is known as the acorn motif, which represents power or victory and was sometimes used in relation to military funerals.<sup>47</sup> For this specific example, it is unclear why or for whom the motif was utilized, but what is particularly interesting is that these earrings are meant to catch the eyes of a passerby. The use of the double acorns on each earring hanging from golden ear wires indicates that these dramatic earrings were not only created for memorial or sentimental purposes, but also as a fashion statement. However, some pieces of mourning jewelry did not need to accommodate a high-end patron. Examples of materials utilized for brooches such as

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<sup>46</sup> DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*.

<sup>47</sup> DeLorme, *Mourning Art & Jewelry*.

pressed horn and wood, were a popular choice of material like the next piece of mourning jewelry I will discuss.



**Figure 4 Hand holding a flower wreath. Gutta-percha mourning brooch, 1880's.  
Source: Private Collection**

This mourning brooch appears different than many other pieces of mourning jewelry. This brooch is not made from fine materials such as gold or precious/semi-precious gemstone, but a material known as Gutta Percha. This material is made from “latex derived from the sap of the Palaquium, Isonandra and Dichopsis gutta trees found in the Malaysian archipelago, one of the many outposts of the British Empire.”<sup>48</sup> It is important to note that the expansion of imperial influence was not strictly isolated in the United Kingdom and by the transatlantic influence of mourning culture made various materials to make mourning jewelry available.

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<sup>48</sup> Paula Bixel, “Early Plastics in Mourning Jewelry: Installment 3 of the Identify Series.” Gem Set Love. Gem Set Love, November 5, 2016. <https://gemsetlove.com/blogs/identify-an-informational-blog-on-jewelry-identification/the-new-plastics-of-the-late-19th-century-and-their-use-in-mourning-jewelry>.



During the Victorian era, the hand motif was used in the 1870s and 1880s, which is beneficial in dating pieces like this brooch. The hand motif, specifically a female hand holding flowers or a wreath of flowers, symbolizes power, faith, divine acceptance, and the relationship between individuals and the heavenly realm, which determines the soul's destination.<sup>49</sup> The hand motif also represents the immortalization of the deceased, which was the primary goal of those who wished to memorialize their loved ones, to keep their memory alive for eternity.<sup>50</sup>

The physical appearance of mourning brooches was as diverse as the individuals they were created for. This is evident in the analysis of the following brooch, as it is crafted primarily out of the hair of the deceased individual.



**Figure 5 Hair work Brooch made from human hair, 1841. Source: Art of Mourning**

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<sup>49</sup> Johannis Tsoumas, “Mourning Jewelry in Late Georgian and Victorian Britain: A World of Fantasy and Tears,” *Convergences - Journal of Research and Arts Education* 15:30 (2022): 121–34. <https://doi.org/10.53681/c1514225187514391s.30.150>.

<sup>50</sup> Tsoumas, “Mourning Jewelry in Late Georgian and Victorian Britain.”

The brooch pictured above is an example that mourning jewelry does not have to cost an immense amount of money. Many brooches created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were also woven into shapes, like this hair brooch woven into a bow. Sometimes, the shape of the brooch is just that, a shape that the mourner decided on. However simple the design, it does not lose its importance. This brooch was made in the memory of a sixteen-year-old girl named Sarah Beth Sparks. It is important to note that in the center of the bow, gold is wired around to help keep its shape. A gold pin is also located on the brooch that is engraved with the birth date (December 26, 1825) and death date (March 1, 1841) of Sarah Beth Sparks.<sup>51</sup>

These five examples are just a few of the many different pieces of hair jewelry, and only a small fraction of mourning jewelry that remains from the Victorian era. As long as these historical artifacts remain, the accessibility of learning about them and studying them will remain. Fortunately, as centuries have passed, a resurgence of interest in Victorian mourning culture, hair jewelry, and art has gained momentum in contemporary society.

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<sup>51</sup> Art of Mourning, "A Hair Brooch for Sarah Beth Sparks, 1841," Art of Mourning. April 16, 2016. <https://artofmourning.com/a-hair-brooch-for-sarah-beth-sparks-1841/>.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESURGENCE OF VICTORIAN MOURNING CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

The grasp that mourning culture had on society during the 19th century might have faded out after World War I, but a resurgence of interest in Victorian mourning culture has surfaced over the 21st century. Museums that cater to a more eclectic group of people with an interest in the odd and macabre, as well as various events referred to as “oddities markets,” have shifted how society interacts with specific objects utilized in Victorian mourning practices. Not only do we see a renewed interest in these objects from antiques collectors and sellers, but there is also an increase in educating the public about these objects and practices from centuries ago.

In this chapter, I will discuss how museums in the 21st century have created and included exhibits and seminars on Victorian mourning culture and how objects such as hair work and mourning clothing are still popular today. I will also discuss how the market for Victorian mourning culture has increased immensely among antique collectors and sellers over the past twenty years and how the obtaining of these objects creates a sort of “status” within the collector community. Although this “status” is not focused specifically on social class and the general status of wealth and “proper breeding” as it usually was in the Victorian period, it still has special merit to those who collect and educate themselves about the objects and customs. The resurgence of interest in Victorian mourning culture has created a renewed space for avid collectors and material culture

historians to analyze and research these objects that played a pivotal role in Victorian society.

### CONTEMPORARY MOURNING EXHIBITIONS AND MUSEUMS

The resurgence of interest in Victorian mourning culture has not gone unnoticed by historical societies and museums. As these institutions utilize societal interest in what they curate and research, these institutions are finding ways to communicate the history and mediums used in Victorian mourning culture to wider audiences. From January 19, 2018 to July 12, 2018, the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as well as Evan Michelson and John Whitenight and in collaboration with the Morbid Anatomy Museum in New York City, curated an exhibition titled *Woven Strands: The Art of Human Hair Work*, which showcased five private collections of Victorian hair art.<sup>52</sup> The purpose of this exhibit was to create a space highlighting an “exquisite group of hair art and jewelry as well as accompanying materials that discuss the social expectations of Victorian era mourning rituals that ruled 19th century society with strict standards.”<sup>53</sup> A few selected pieces of artwork still remain on the Mütter Museum’s website dedicated to the exhibition, including a *Carte de Visite Collection*, a *Primitive Method Society Dome*, and an *Ambrotype (of Three People) and Wreath* or a “Generational Hair Wreath”.<sup>54</sup> Below are images of the hair work that are mentioned above:

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<sup>52</sup> “Woven Strands,” The Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://muttermuseum.org/exhibitions/woven-strands>.

<sup>53</sup> “Woven Strands,” Mütter Museum.

<sup>54</sup> “Woven Strands,” Mütter Museum.



**Figure 6 Carte de visite Collection. Mid-to-late Nineteenth Century. Human hair, glass beads, porcelain, cabinet cards, wood. 36" x 32" From the collection of Evan Michelson**



**Figure 7 Primitive Methodist Society Dome (Hair Tree of Church Staff). Glass, Ebonized wood, human hair, wire, metal. 15" x 17" x 18-1/2. From the collection of John Whitenight and Frederick LaValley**



**Figure 8 Ambrotype (of Three People) and Wreath. Circa 1850. Glit wood, glass, ambrotype, human hair, wire, straw flowers, paper. 19-1/2" x 18" x 14". From the collection of John Whitenight and Frederick LaValley**

These pieces of hair art are contemporary reminders of the past, which dates to over 150 years ago. The continual interest in such pieces has encouraged collectors of both standard Victorian antiques and the more obscure. This increase in public interest of Victorian hair art is the reason the Mütter Museum decided to debut the exhibit at the time they did. The museum states on the exhibit's home page that Victorian hair work holds a significant place in material society as a type of "folk art" of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and is:

"A sentimental expression of grief and love, usually created by women whose identities have become anonymous over time. Human hair (from both living and deceased persons) was used to form flower bouquets, wreaths, braided jewelry chains, weeping willows, and painted scenes of mourning. Considered to be a form of portraiture, these were cherished tokens to preserve the memory of a deceased loved one, chart a vibrant family tree of the living, or to be traded as friendship keepsakes. It is rare to view such pieces publicly as they were created in domestic settings, for home display."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "Woven Strands," Mütter Museum.

For over a century and a half, society has piqued its interest in both the functionality and aesthetic of Victorian hair work. Not only has the interest gained momentum for mourning hairwork, but also for sentimental pieces as well.

Large, well-established museums are not the only places providing accessibility to learning about Victorian mourning culture. In Norfolk, Virginia, the Hunter House Victorian Museum is specifically dedicated to educating and providing discussions surrounding social customs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The museum houses historical artifacts that are exclusive to the museum and hosts unique events that both inform and entertain its visitors. The Hunter House Victorian Museum was initially owned by the Hunter family in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and was the family house for many years. Like other museums, this privately owned museum is education-based and provides optional tours for visitors who wish to learn more about the Hunter family and the Victorian period's inspiration in America. While not strictly focusing their exhibitions on mourning culture, every October the museum holds a temporary exhibition dedicated to Victorian mourning culture. This exhibition has consistently gained the most attention from museum visitors, as they wish to know more about a time when mourning was more ritualized and publicly practiced.

#### **MUSEUMS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

America is not the only country where contemporary mourning exhibits have grabbed the attention of museum goers. Tracing the rooted beginnings of Victorian mourning culture, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London houses some of Queen Victoria's mourning clothing and jewels. As stated earlier in this thesis, after her

husband, Prince Albert's death, the Queen remained in mourning attire for the remainder of her life. The Victoria & Albert Museum is an educational staple to those who wish to learn more about Queen Victoria's personal relationship with death and mourning.

National Funeral Museum in London is a privately owned museum that shares its passion for Victorian mourning and the history of death and funerary customs. The museum is part of T. Cribb & Sons, an independently owned funeral business that created this museum to share with the public their collection of artifacts that have come from the history of Britain's mourning culture. Some of the objects found within this museum include palette-worked hair brooches and wall art, mourning clothing, and funerary plaques, which are all 19th century artifacts from Britain's history. Another key feature of this privately owned museum is the extensive library of over five hundred books that are available upon request to students and researchers.<sup>56</sup> These books are specifically curated in the museum library for educating scholars on mourning, funerary, and death practices, which is often an overlooked topic in general historical research, yet a crucial and guaranteed part of life.

#### **CONTEMPORARY VICTORIAN MOURNING CULTURE SCHOLARS AND PRACTITIONERS**

Some of the more prominent people engaged in the study of Victorian mourning culture are not only scholars, but practitioners and researchers of mourning culture. One of the most well-known scholars that has made a significant impact on the research and discourse on Victorian hair work jewelry and art is art historian Karen Bachmann, a

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<sup>56</sup> "National Funeral Museum UK," National Funeral Museum UK, Curator's Blog, accessed March 29, 2023, <https://nationalfuneralmuseum.wordpress.com/>



Brooklyn based expert jeweler and a Professor of Art and Design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. Since writing her own MA Thesis on Victorian hairwork titled “Hairy Secrets: Victorian Hairwork as Memory Object,” Bachmann is considered to be a “renowned expert in ornamental hairwork and has led countless workshops and lectures on the subject.”<sup>57</sup> Bachmann has conducted many classes on hairwork and how to create hairwork utilizing braiding and weaving techniques, including seminars at the Morbid Anatomy Museum in Brooklyn, New York, and the Center for Design and Material Culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.<sup>58</sup> According to the Morbid Anatomy Museum’s website, Bachmann’s interest in “obscure and arcane forms of personal ornamentation guided her into a fascination with memento mori and Victorian hairwork jewelry.”<sup>59</sup>

One of Bachmann’s classes, *From Hairbrush to Hairwork: A Workshop with Karen Bachmann*, highlights an overview of hairwork that was created during the Victorian era and how the utilization of hair can be understood as a personal medium used for art and design.<sup>60</sup> Bachmann’s workshop classes also include a hands-on element, where students are given the opportunity to create their own piece of hair work. The process of creating hairwork provides her students with an insight into the intricate

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<sup>57</sup> Morbid Anatomy Museum, “In-Person Victorian Hairwork Class, with Master Jeweler, Educator and Art Historian Karen Bachmann, Taking Place April 30,” Morbid Anatomy, accessed March 28, 2023, <https://www.morbidanatomy.org/classes/in-person-victorian-hairwork-class-with-master-jeweler-educator-and-art-historian-karen-bachmann>.

<sup>58</sup> Samantha Comerford, “From Hairbrush to Hairwork: A Workshop with Karen Bachmann,” Center for Design and Material Culture, March 24, 2021, <https://cdmc.wisc.edu/2021/02/19/from-hairbrush-to-hairwork-a-workshop-with-karen-bachmann/>.

<sup>59</sup> Morbid Anatomy Museum, “In-Person Victorian Hairwork Class.”

<sup>60</sup> Comerford, “From Hairbrush to Hairwork.”

artisanship of working with hair as a medium in artwork. Karen Bachmann has shared her expertise in Victorian mourning hairwork and jewelry for over two decades and continues to educate others at her seminars today.

Another prominent scholar in Victorian hairwork is Sarah Nehama, a New England based jewelry artist and author. Nehama is best known for the book she published in 2012 titled, *In Death Lamented: The Tradition of Anglo-American Mourning Jewelry*, which also served as a companion to an exhibition that Nehama co-curated with the Massachusetts Historical Society in 2012.<sup>61</sup> Also, an educator and collector herself, Nehama has given many seminars and talks over the past twelve years about mourning jewelry, as well as a few webinars. Her practical instruction in hairwork has included conducting classes at the Victorian Hair Workers International Conference in August 2022 and King's Chapel in Boston in June 2020.<sup>62</sup> Nehama has also lectured at many museums and historical societies such as the American Society for Jewelry Historians.<sup>63</sup> Over the course of her academic career, Sarah Nehama has been labeled as an expert on mourning and sentimental jewelry.

As the resurgence of interest in Victorian mourning culture has increased in contemporary society, these academics' fascination with the subject of hairwork as a topic of research has led into the practice of hairwork as an ongoing art form. This suggests that not only did their fascination grow as they further researched Victorian

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<sup>61</sup> Sarah Nehama, "Links," Sarah Nehama, accessed March 29, 2023, <http://www.sarahnehama.com/links>.

<sup>62</sup> Sarah Nehama, "Links."

<sup>63</sup> Sarah Nehama, "The Artist," Sarah Nehama, accessed March 29, 2023, <http://www.sarahnehama.com/links>

mourning culture, but also found value in continuing the tradition and spreading it to another generation of researchers and practitioners.

## **UTILIZING 19TH CENTURY HISTORY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP IN 21ST CENTURY HAIR ART**

Amanda Woomer, author of several books such as *A Very Frightful Victorian Christmas* and *A Haunted Atlas of Western New York*, as well as her all-women's journal highlighting strange and unusual topics, *The Feminine Macabre*, founded a traveling "museum" based in Buffalo, New York. Woomer has a strong social media presence, sharing her personal grief story of losing her younger brother that initiated her decision to establish the museum and share the topic of death and mourning with all of those who are interested. Woomer also has created a Patreon, which provides members exclusive access to objects that have been recently acquired for the museum's continually growing collection. By creating a space on a digital platform, Woomer has allowed the dissemination of images and texts about these objects. The important aspect of having a digital platform is that the access and visibility of the objects (and the community who collect them) is dedicated to a much wider audience and can be viewed from anywhere at any given time.

Woomer's newest book, *The Art of Grieving: The Beauty Behind Victorian Mourning Customs*, provides its readers with a constructed picture of 19th century mourning customs that shaped what is known today as Victorian mourning culture.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Amanda Woomer, *The Art of Grieving: The Beauty Behind Victorian Mourning Customs*, Independently Published, April 3, 2023.

Woomer focuses her attention on the art of Victorian hairwork and its significance to society then and now. Most importantly, especially for this paper, is her discourse on how contemporary society can utilize these customs and rituals for our own personal grieving.<sup>65</sup> By revisiting centuries old customs, individuals from contemporary society can understand that people have approached the topic of grief and mourning in similar methods.

Currently, Woomer is scheduling public lectures based on her collection and providing a safe and open space to discuss grief and death positivity in the 21st century. Her most current lecture, titled “Victorian Mourning Rituals,” provides an insight into how Victorians utilized specific rituals for mourning and their significance for those who grieve. By curating events such as this one, Woomer is providing contemporary society with a way to reflect and utilize ways to cope with their own losses and grief. Not only does Woomer focus her project on mourning customs, but she also displays her collection at her lectures, which include the most intriguing pieces of her collection, Victorian hairwork art and jewelry.

The methods of creating hair work jewelry and art are both from the past and the present. During the 19th century, a method of creating watch fobs and other pieces of jewelry with human hair, called “table-worked” hair, which includes threading and braiding the hair while it is being fed through a hole in the center of the table. Most interestingly, this method is still used by contemporary hair work artists. One of the more well-known artists, Gina Lacovelli, specializes in the creation of mementos for those who

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<sup>65</sup> Woomer, *The Art of Grieving*.

wish to memorialize their loved ones by commissioning a piece of hairwork jewelry.<sup>66</sup> Her work also extends out to creating custom keepsake pieces for beloved animals, specifically a dog, cat, or any other animal that has fur.<sup>67</sup>

Based in Charleston, South Carolina, Lacovelli offers assorted designs and styles of hairwork jewelry to be created for her customers. Ranging from basic braided and weaved designs and styles to more intricate table-worked hair jewelry that can be placed within rings or fashioned into bracelets and watch chains, Lacovelli provides a plethora of ways for her customers to memorialize their loved ones for eternity. On her website, Lacovelli states that,

“Hair – such a delicate fiber that is easily shaped to express our inner selves. For generations, this same fiber has been woven into keepsake jewelry to be shared with loved ones. Whether it is baby’s first haircut, your spouse’s beard hair, or grandma’s white curls, it can be woven into a modern heirloom to keep close to your heart.”<sup>68</sup>

Lacovelli is one of the few contemporary hairwork artists in the United States that wish to keep the centuries old method of memorializing those who have passed with something as significantly personal as hair.

Another well-known artist, Elizabeth Vidrine, is a Denver based hair work artist that also creates Victorian mourning inspired jewelry utilizing 19th century methods. Having an enthusiastic interest in history, Vidrine founded her business in 2022, *EP Hair Mementos*, and provides individuals the ability to commission a personal keepsake of

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<sup>66</sup> Gina Lacovelli, “Sentimental and Mourning Jewelry,” Mementos Entwined, accessed March 26, 2023, <https://mementosentwined.com/>.

<sup>67</sup> Gina Lacovelli, “FAQ,” Mementos Entwined, accessed March 26, 2023, <https://mementosentwined.com/faq/>.

<sup>68</sup> Gina Lacovelli, “Keepsakes with Hair,” Mementos Entwined, accessed March 26, 2023, <https://mementosentwined.com/>.

their loved ones to honor their memory.<sup>69</sup> Similar to Gina Lacovelli, Vidrine also allows for her customers to have hair work created for their pets as well. The authors and artists of 21<sup>st</sup> century mourning and hairwork culture focus more on the affective and emotional aspect of the work and creating a platform for people to talk about an uncomfortable subject in a way that is meaningful.

The most intriguing aspect of creating jewelry out of hair is the stylistic choices that each artist utilizes. Many contemporary hair workers use Victorian techniques and methods of creating jewelry. Varying from artist to artist, they will either use antique lockets and pendants to house the intricately crafted hairwork or choose a more contemporary setting for their work. Hairwork artists try to maintain Victorian iconography in their designs, reflecting a time when hairwork was at its height of popularity.

### **THE MEANS OF MOURNING ARTIFACTS**

It is evident more so now than ever that a renewed interest in Victorian mourning customs and artifacts has gained momentum in contemporary society. Alongside this newfound interest in all things “macabre,” the market for these objects has also increased as well. Not only have Victorian mourning artifacts become a popular interest in antique collectors and sellers, but education and seminars based on the topic of mourning have emerged. There are large communities of people for whom this kind of work has experienced a revival in its meaning and technique. Through social media and other

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<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Vidrine, “Home,” EP Hair Mementos, 2022, <https://www.ephairmementos.com/>.

places where people share not only historical but also contemporary hair work, an interest in this kind of artifact has come to be a marker of a certain kind of taste. Instead of being specifically tied to social class, the “status” of these objects can have more than one meaning.

First, collecting and researching these artifacts shows the collector’s knowledge of the past, ability to find a good piece, and categorize it in its proper context. For example, sharing photographs and discussing one’s finds online with others. By creating a space where the collector can share knowledge on a popular platform, this provides a sense of “importance” in the collector community. Although it does not exclusively include social status in the way 19<sup>th</sup> century people utilized these objects, it provides a type of social standing within the Victorian mourning culture collector community.

Secondly, it intentionally marks people out, in an affirming way, as a subculture of people who are interested in arts that might be considered morbid or macabre. By doing so, it creates a very personal way of telling one’s own individual story and how the objects can make one feel connected to Victorian mourning culture. The subculture of people that continue to research and collect mourning artifacts from the Victorian era help maintain the memory of the people who once lived and continue to share their stories, although these individuals have been gone for a couple of centuries.

However, as mentioned above, there is a contrast with the nineteenth century, where the kinds of mourning attire that one might wear would help people recognize their class, deportment, and breeding. For 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars and observers of Victorian mourning culture, the focus is more on acquiring status as part of a “knowledgeable

minority” who recognize the skill and beauty of these pieces but also connect to them on a personal level. The discussion of status is still relevant in the subject of Victorian mourning culture. Although the idea of status has shifted from the 19<sup>th</sup> century meaning, the importance of the artifacts remains the same, which is to utilize them as tools of education and preserve them and the understanding of Victorian customs that can still be utilized today.



## CONCLUSION

The importance of Victorian mourning culture is much more than black mourning dresses and gilded hair work placed into golden brooches. It revolutionized how we partake in funerary customs and manage the occurrence of death in society. From the beginnings of the funeral industry to the emergence and commercialization of mourning culture as a social phenomenon, Victorian mourning culture provides historians and other scholars with an insight into how 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society navigated the subject of death. The practices and mindset that surrounded Victorians spread to the United States and made an everlasting effect on how Americans also approach the subject of death.

The development of mourning culture became yet another method of establishing the distinction of social classes through the utilization of clothing and accessories. The upper classes maintained their well to do images by using higher quality fabrics specifically for their commissioned mourning clothing. This extended into their accessories as well, utilizing fine metals such as gold and semi-precious stones like garnet, onyx, and seed pearls.

The utilization of human hair became a prominent artistic medium during the Victorian era as a way for mourners to keep a tangible memento of their deceased loved ones. This practice expanded throughout all classes of society as hair was a free material that was obtained easily. While the lower classes simply braided or weaved the hair into a memento that could be placed in their pocket or kept safe in a drawer, the upper classes

sent their hair swatches to be professionally crafted into expensive settings to wear as jewelry. This aspect of Victorian mourning culture has re-emerged as a 21<sup>st</sup> century medium of jewelry making within the subculture of revivalists of Victorian mourning culture.

Over the span of two centuries, the resurgence of interest in Victorian mourning culture has increased significantly. More so over the last twenty to thirty years, several art historians and other scholars have focused their research on the topic. Scholars like Karen Bachmann and Sarah Nehama have spent much of their time learning and educating the public on not only the history of mourning and sentimental hairwork, but also the 19<sup>th</sup> century techniques used to create such pieces of art. Other researchers and collectors have followed in their path and have created easily accessible content that is available to anyone who wishes to learn more about Victorian mourning culture and its significance in 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

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