

Hairwork of the nineteenth century - hair jewelry: 19th century United States and Europe

[Magazine Antiques](#), [March, 2001](#) by [Irene Guggenheim Navarro](#)

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The nineteenth century saw an explosion in the popularity of hairwork in Europe and the United States. Indeed, most surviving examples originate from this period. [1] Today, nineteenth-century hair jewelry is invariably associated with mourning, and, while much was made and worn for that purpose, much was also made and exchanged to mark happier circumstances, such as an engagement, or friendship. Ultimately, it was produced purely as a fashion accessory.

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One social historian has observed that the Industrial Revolution brought about an "emotional revolution as well," [2] noting that in the eighteenth century emotions such as grief were expressed communally and thus were diffused amongst members of a church or community. The stresses and strains of the industrial nineteenth century brought about a spiritual and emotional retreat to the soothing comforts of hearth and family and a tendency to escape from the harsher realities. Eighteenth-century sentiment was replaced by nineteenth-century sentimentality, as evoked in the following popular verse: "If I should from this world/Depart you'd have a bit of my/Hair my hand and heart if we/Could no more each other see/You could still remember me." [3]

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Sentimental hair jewelry was worn by members of all classes, from commoners to royalty. Napoleon I (r. 1804-1815) had a watch chain made of the Empress Marie Louise's (r. 1810-1815) hair. England's George IV (r. 1820-1830) was a great giver and receiver of hair tokens, but the greatest patron of, and influence on, the craft was Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901). She was given several hair bracelets on the occasion of her sixteenth birthday, which may have established her lifelong inclination to offer and accept items of hair jewelry. When the Empress Eugenie (r. 1853-1871) and her husband, Napoleon III (r. 1852-1871), traveled to England on a state visit in 1855, Queen Victoria wrote in her journal on April 20 that Eugenie "was touched to tears when I gave her a bracelet with my hair." [4]

From the time of her engagement to Prince Albert (1819-1861) in 1839, Victoria always wore a lock of his hair in a locket, brooch, or bracelet, and his untimely death in 1861 spurred the development and popularity of hair jewelry. The queen's intense and intractable grief launched her, and thus the rest of England, into a seemingly endless mourning period of forty years, which in its excess eventually made mourning fashionable. Hair jewelry, one of the few acceptable decorative accessories in the strictly prescribed mourning dress toilette, became all the rage. An 1858 issue of the *New belle assemblee*, a popular English fashion paper, contained a gushing review of the work of the eminent nineteenth-century French hair artisan Gabriel Lemonnier (d. c. 1882):

The sentimental jewellery of Limonnier [sic] is of another character from what all the world is acquainted with, and which gives the locket, or brooch, or ring, in which some beloved tress or precious curl is enshrined, the appearance of having been designed from a monuary tablet. Have we not all met ladies wearing as a brooch, by way of loving remembrance, a tomb between two willow trees formed of the hair of the individual for whom their crape was worn, and which from its very nature must be laid aside with it? Our artist converts the relic into an ornament for all times and places-expands it into a broad ribbon as a bracelet and fastens it with a forget-me-not in turquoises and brilliants [see Pls. III, VI, Fig. 1], weaves it into chains for the neck, the flacon, or the fan; makes it into a medallion of leaves and flowers; and of these last the most beautiful specimens I have seen have been formed of the saintly white hair of age. This he converts into orange-flowers, white roses, chrysanthemums and most charming of all, clusters of lily-of-the-valley. [5]

England's involvement in constant warfare during Victoria's reign fueled the production of hair jewelry. The Indian Mutiny (1857) and Crimean War (in which England fought from 1854 to 1856), along with a series of endless minor skirmishes, took heavy tolls on England's male population and put many a wife, mother, sister, and friend into mourning. Increasingly the mourning toilette included a piece of memorial jewelry, often fashioned from a lock of the deceased soldier's hair. In the United States, the Civil War gave the same impetus to the art of hairwork, particularly memorial lockets and brooches. The brooch in Plate II, however, memorializes not a heroic death in battle but an ignominious one steeped in tragedy. It was made for Martha Williams Carter (see Pls. XHa, XIIb), a great-great-granddaughter of Martha Washington and a cousin of Robert E. Lee (1807-1870), in memory of her young brother William Orton Williams. He and his cousin Walter Gibson Peter (1842-1863) were the first, and possibly the only Confederate officers hanged as spies. Orton's blond hair; worked into a cross, rests atop a field of his sister's brown hair. A hairwork and gold anchor, symbolizing hope, is suspended from the brooch, the back of which is engraved with both their names. Commemorative pieces canonizing the memories of Civil War

generals and notables were farther by-products of the conflict, particularly in the South, where seemingly endless quantities of brooches and lockets enshrining the hair of Jefferson Davis (1808-1889) and Robert E. Lee survive. An extraordinary example of this type of hairwork is the floral spray pictured in Plate VIII. Each of the fourteen flowers is made from the hair of a different Civil War notable, including Davis and Lee, as well as Generals Jeb Stuart (1833-1864) and Turner Ashby (1828-1862).

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After the Civil War the art of hairwork entered a gradual state of decline until its ultimate demise in the early 1900s. The dawn of the twentieth century brought with it a distaste for things Victorian and a reaction against many tenets Victorians held dear. The sentimentality of the era was viewed with a mixture of cynicism and derision. The Victorian way of death was irrelevant in an era in which the approach to mortality bordered on denial, and grief was looked on as self-pity. [6] In the end, the art of hair jewelry was viewed as a macabre and unsavory product of a bygone era. This distaste was reflected in the strongly worded introduction to the catalogue of a 1945 exhibition: "The gruesome idea of wearing jewelry made from the hair of a loved one who has died is hard for the matter-of-fact person of today to grasp....These articles of jewelry were worn with sadistic pleasure." [7]

Adding to the demise of hairwork was the rather curious notion that hair was the carrier of plague, an that arose in the first years of the twentieth century and gathered momentum during the following two decades, perhaps in correlation with increasing awareness of the mechanisms of infection. The organic quality of hair, coupled with its association with death, fanned the flames of revulsion, and even quite recently collectors have been known to burn the hair out of a newly acquired brooch or ring. [8]

Finally just as fashion had contributed to the rise of hairwork, so did it toll its death knell. In 1908 a noted British art and jewelry historian wrote,

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the goddess Fashion, who throughout all ages has waged war on the production of the goldsmith, has laid a heavier hand on these [hair jewelry]....Most families from time to time have consigned to the melting pot accumulations of these memorials of their predecessors; and those who have been long in the jeweller's business confess to the hundreds of such relics they have broken up....The custom of wearing ornaments composed of such sombre and unpleasing material has now to all intents and purposes ceased, though it is carried on to a certain extent in France, where ouvrages en cheveux in the form of bracelets and lockets are still worn as précieux souvenirs de famille. [9]

As the writer suggests, the French continued to appreciate and practice the art of hairwork, particularly its memorial aspect, longer than other Europeans or Americans. After 1930, however, "les artistes en cheveux," professional hair-workers in France, all but disappeared. [10] In England the aristocracy also clung to the tradition of wearing and commissioning memorial hair jewelry into the twentieth century. The early twentieth-century ledgers of Hennell and Sons, a jewelry firm in London, described the making of elegant costly jewels in which hairwork adorned with ciphers and dates in rose diamonds was enclosed behind rock crystal." In fact, the hairwork was the least important element of these objects.

During its heyday, fashion and sentiment were symbiotically entwined in hair jewelry. Whereas in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries hair was used sparingly in larger compositions, in the nineteenth century it was used in such abundance that entire pieces were woven of it. No longer was it discreetly contained behind a crystal oculus but exposed and worn in direct contact with the body--as watch chains, bracelets, earrings, and necklaces (see III, VI, XI), even as rings in the form of miniature woven belts (Pl. V). Hair jewelry had evolved into a genre valued for the quality and beauty of the hairwork alone.

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The techniques used to create this type of hair jewelry resemble those for making bobbin lace. The hair was first cleaned by soaking or even boiling it for several minutes in borax and water; it was then rinsed and scraped of impurities with a small knife. Once dry, it was divided into sections, each containing a few strands of equal length. Tiny weights were tied to one end of each hair bundle and the opposite ends were gathered, tied together with thread, and glued. A loop of thread was attached to the glued end and used to attach the bundle of weighted hair strands to a hook in an opening in the center of a round worktable (Fig. 3). The bundles were then arranged evenly and concentrically around the table surface, like spokes in a wheel. The loop was gently removed from the hook so that another weight could be attached to it to act as a counterbalance, hanging underneath the table opening. The weaving process could then begin. A simple pattern might require just a few weighted strands, whereas a complicated one could require scores.

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Cylindrical lengths of woven hair could be made by weaving the hair around a wire or metal tube inserted in the hole in the

center of the worktable. The circumference of the hair cylinder was regulated by the size of the metal insert. When the weaving was completed, the center counterweight was detached from the looped, glued end; the small individual weights were cut off, and any small amounts of unworked hair were bound together with thread. The tube with the worked hair around it was removed from the table, simmered in scalding water, and allowed to dry. Once dry, the hair was gently slid off the mold and both ends were glued so as not to unravel. Gold fittings could then be attached to form watch chains, bracelets, necklaces, and certain kinds of brooches (see Pl. X). Sometimes several cylinders were intertwined to form an intricate cable bracelet (see Pl. I). Wooden molds (see Pl. VII) could be used to create earrings and necklaces of incredible lightness and delicacy in an array of whimsical shapes, such as acorns, bells, lyres, and hearts (see Pl. XI and Fig. 5).

The eighteenth-century practice of enclosing hairwork behind crystal continued in the nineteenth century, but the brooch replaced the ring in popularity, and by the middle of the century, such brooches had become quite large. Small faceted jet stones obtained from the cliffs of Whitby along the North Yorkshire coast of England were often used as a suitably subdued decorative surround on memorial brooches in the first half of the century while those made later, particularly after 1860, were often framed in black enamel lettered in gold with such sentiments as "In Memory of" (see Pl. XVIII). Large oval lockets in which the hairwork was hidden from view behind a hinged cover were fashionable between 1860 and 1880.

The hairwork in these larger-scale objects was arranged in patterns similar to those used in the eighteenth century but no longer were ciphers placed on top of the hair. Curls and designs resembling feathers or Prince of Wales feathers were created with increasing levels of technical expertise. A lock of hair was cleaned and trimmed and then wrapped around a small specially made curling iron, which was held over a candle just long enough for the curl to set but not to burn. The curling iron was carefully slid away and the eye of the curl was glued in place with a gummed needle (see Pls. XIII-XV, and Fig. 6). A favorite sentimental format for this technique called for the hair of several family members, the locks artfully arranged behind glass and set in a large gold mount. Engraved on the back were the names of the individuals whose hair had been used.

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The eighteenth-century practice of using dissolved hair, in which hair was pulverized and used as a pigment to paint on ivory plaques, steadily declined after 1830, and by the middle of the nineteenth century it had practically ceased altogether. Meanwhile, the cut-and-paste technique, which also originated in the eighteenth century, continued to flourish. As with much of the art of hairwork, this technique required the patience of Job. Strands of hair were laid on gossamer thin tissue paper and then a small palette knife was used to simultaneously glue them down and flatten them so that the individual hairs lay side by side. The whole was air dried and then cut into any number of shapes and woven or worked as needed. The cut-and-paste technique gave the maker a high level of control over the hair and allowed great precision and detail in a design. Natural motifs such as flowers, plants, trees, birds, butterflies, and bees proliferated (see Pl. XVII).

The French excelled at this technique and were particularly adept in the creation of hair flowers. A Mme. de L'Isle wrote a manual devoted to the art of creating flowers from hair, silk, and paper entitled *Livre-Manuel des Fleurs en Papier en Cheveux en Soie...* (Paris, 1861). The French also created landscapes of poetic delicacy using this technique, which were often, but not exclusively cemetery scenes composed of a cut-and-paste tomb beneath a willow tree with overhanging branches of startling three dimensionality. Occasionally a lone cut-and-paste pansy (from the French *pensee*, or remembrance) peeks out from behind the tomb, a uniquely Gallic touch of whimsy (see Pl. XXI).

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When compared to its American or English counterparts, French hairwork has a distinctly convex appearance, usually owing to the copious amounts of hair used. Occasionally the impression of abundance was achieved by gluing the hair over a small mound of cotton wool, an artifice I discovered while examining a French piece on which a curl had been damaged and the strands parted, exposing the cotton wool underneath. Some designs have a sinuous, undulating quality that is identifiably French (see Pl. XVI).

Among the most distinctive hairwork creations of the later nineteenth century are large wreaths made from abundant locks of hair that were fashioned into individual and recognizable flowers and leaves and mounted on or around cloth-covered wire forms. Victorian sentimentality found expression in such wreaths made from the hair of members of a single family. Each was represented by a flower created from his or her hair. The flowers were sometimes numbered and a genealogical key placed on the front or the back of the wreath. Such wreaths seem to be primarily American, and to a lesser degree English.

Professional hairworkers and jewelers often created large-scale pictures to demonstrate their expertise. One of these, the London jeweler Antoni Forrer (see Pl. IV), who was briefly in partnership with Charles Packer (see Pl. XIX), employed fifty workers at his establishment on Regent Street, and in 1845 was

granted a royal warrant as "Artist in Hair Jewellery to Her Majesty." [12] In 1851 he was awarded a medal at the Crystal Palace Exhibition for a framed set of miniature portraits in hair of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and other members of the royal family, mounted in gold. [13] At the same exhibition, another medal was awarded to the firm of Lemonnier et Cie of Paris for a large hairwork portrait of Queen Victoria. Gabriel Lemonnier, who founded the firm in 1826, had been designated "Artiste dessinateur en cheveux de la Reine" and was known throughout Europe for his exquisite hair jewelry. [14] A somewhat less-distinguished Parisian jewelry and hairworking firm was Charleux, "Fournisseur de la Reine d'Espagne," which was well known by 1857 and remained in business until the beginning of the twentieth century. [15]

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In the United States, William Ernst Moutoux headed a successful professional hair jewelry establishment at 81 Nassau Street in New York City. His trade catalogue of 1883 proclaims him the "Leading artist in hair of the world and manufacturing jeweler." It contains hundreds of illustrations of hairwork brooches, bracelets, earrings, watch chains, and every other conceivable form of late nineteenth-century hair jewelry (see Figs. 2,5), as well as hair pictures and landscapes (see Pls. XX, XXII, and Figs. 8,9). The designs and technique of the pictures convey a French influence, presumably reflecting Moutoux's Huguenot heritage. [16]

The incredible popularity of hair jewelry in the mid-nineteenth century sometimes led professional hairworkers to overlook the sentimental aspects of the genre. Hair was routinely purchased from convents and from women in dire straits, usually in small towns or villages. As Alexanna Speight, a professional hairworker in London, wrote in 1871:

Now to the lasting disgrace of those who practice it, there are persons whose greed of gain leaves them no regard for the finer feelings of the living; no respect for the dead. The hair of a departed friend is taken to a tradesman to be worked up into some little device, and what is frequently done is this--the hair may either be too short or not of sufficient quantity for the purpose intended--the tradesman knowing this, does not as he ought to do, suggest another design, but dishonestly matches the hair with other hair perhaps already worked up, and the unhappy dupe lives on in the delusion that he possesses the hair of a friend whose memory cherishes, whilst he in fact has that of some person whom he has never seen or heard of. [17]

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Speight, whose retail establishment was on Oxford Street and who catered to such clients as Queen Victoria's daughter Beatrice, was one of a number of professional hairworkers who also wrote guides for the amateur (see P1. XIII). Some of the instructions were incredibly complex, and they were often accompanied by self-promoting advertisements for kits, jewelry fittings, and other accessories that could be purchased from the hairworker's own establishment. Speight's *Lock of Hair*, for example, which was the most famous of these manuals, with editions published in 1871 and 1872, included instructions for the novice, a treatise on the ancient and modern history of hair and several advertisements for supplies that could be purchased from Speight (see Fig. 7).

The *Lock of Hair* was so successful that fifteen years after its first publication, the National Artistic Hairwork Company in Chicago published a verbatim copy of the second part of the book under its own title, *Hair Ornaments: The Art of Working in Hair*. The first instructions on hairwork to be published in this country appeared in Godey's *Lady's Book* in December 1850 and January and February 1851. In introducing the series, the editor observed:

Of the various employments for the fingers lately introduced among our countrywomen, none is, perhaps, more interesting than that which we are about to describe viz, hair-work....Hitherto almost exclusively confined to professed manufacturers of hair trinkets, this work has now become a drawing room occupation, as elegant and as free from all the annoyances and objections of litter dirt, or unpleasant smells, as the much practiced knitting netting and crochet can be....By acquiring a knowledge of this art, ladies will be themselves enabled to manufacture the hair of beloved friends and relatives into bracelets, chains, ring and ear-rings, and devices, and thus insure that they do actually wear the memento they prize, and not a fabric substituted for it, as we fear has sometimes been the case. [18]

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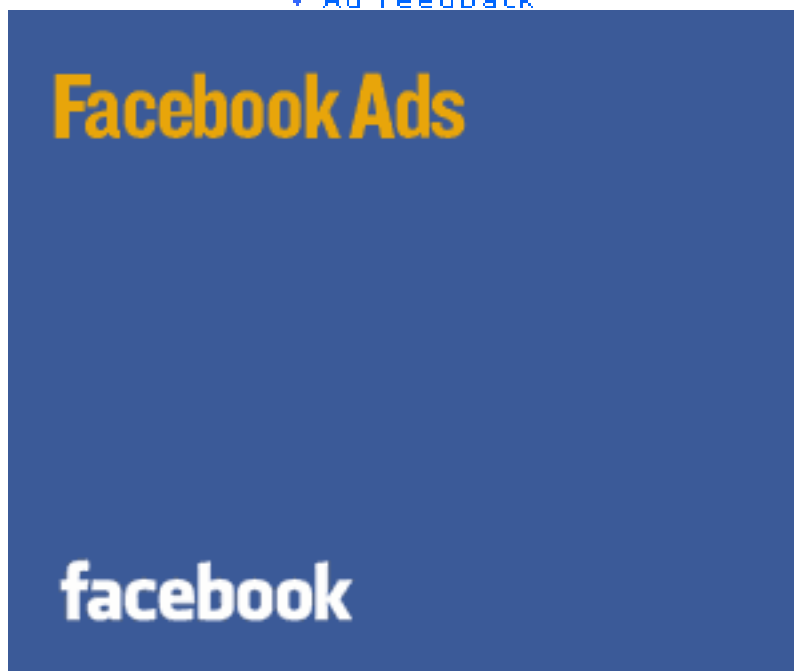
The article mentions the availability of two types of braiding tables: the standard table, which was approximately four feet high and was suitable for working while standing, and the "ladies table," which was approximately thirty-two inches tall and was intended to be used atop a regular table at which the worker was seated. Godley's recommended the standard version to avoid interference of women's hoop skirts with the braiding weights and for general comfort, an important factor. Even the most adept amateur must have spent long hours at the braiding table given the complexity of the instructions. Some are so intricate and convoluted that several readings leave a modern amateur without a clue as to how to proceed. On the other hand, the discussion of techniques employed for creating such devices as feathers are oddly vague.

An endearing by-product of amateur hairwork is the hair album, into which one pasted simply worked locks of hair from friends or family. The ringlets or braided locks were sometimes embellished with a small ribbon or dried flower and accompanied by a handwritten sentiment. Such albums or modest pieces of homemade hairwork jewelry were as treasured as the professional creations of Speight or Moutoux.

IRENE GUGGENHEIM NAVARRO is a jewelry specialist, with a particular interest in hairwork, at Tudor Place, a historic house museum in Washington, D. C.

(1.) A discussion of hairwork in jewelry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries appeared in Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch, "Jewelry for mourning, love, and fancy, 1770-1830" *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, vol. 155, no. 4 (April 1999), pp. 566-575.

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- (2.) David Stannard, "Where All OurSteps are Tending," in A Time to Mouv: Expressions of Grief in Nineteenth Century America, ed. Martha V. Pike and Janice Gray Armstrong (Museums at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, New York, 1980), p. 23.
- (3.) Quoted in Starr Ockenga, On Women and Friendship: A Collection of Victorian Keepsakes and Traditions (Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, New York, 1993), p. 108.
- (4.) Quoted in Shirley Bury, An Introduction to Sentimental Jewellery (Stemmer House, Owings Mills, Maryland, 1985), p. 45.
- (5.) Quoted in Joan Evans, A History of Jewellery 1100-1870 (Boston Book and Art, Boston, 1970), p. 179.
- (6.) Stannard, "Where All Our steps are Tending," p.26.
- (7.) Lillian Chaplin Bragg and Cornelia Wilder, Savannah's Antique Hair and Mourning Jewelry (Savannah, Georgia, 1945), p.3.
- (8.) Carmelita Johnson, Ornamental Hair-Work (Orirana Press, Canoga Park, California, 1980), p.2.
- (9.) Harold Clifford Smith Jewellery (G. P. Putnams, New York, 1908), p.370.
- (10.) Andree Chanlot, Les Ouvrages en cheveux: Leurs Secrets (A. Chanlot, Paris, 1986), p.36.
- (11.) Diana Scarisbrick, Ancestral Jewels (Vendome Press, New York and Paris, 1990), p. 148.
- (12.) Shirley Bury, Jewellery 1789-1910: The International Era (Antique Collector's Club, woodbridge, Suffolk, 1991), vol. 2, p.686.
- (13.) John Culme, The Directory of Gold and Silversmiths, Jewellers and Allied Traders 1838-1914 (Antique Collector's Club, woodbridge, Suffolk, 1987), vol. 1, p. 160

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[Magazine Antiques](#), [March, 2001](#) by [Irene Guggenheim Navarro](#)

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(14.) Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, 1851: Official Descriptive and illustrated Catalogue (London, 1851), vol. 3, p 1223.

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(15.) The information about Lemonnier and Charleux is from Chanlot, Les Ouvrages, pp. 34,36.

(16.) Conversation in August 1995 with Shelly Foote, assistant chairperson, division of social history, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

(17.) The Lock of Hair (London, 1871), p. 84. Speight is usually referred to as a woman, perhaps because the first name sounds feminine. However, The Lack of Hair includes the following advertisement for private lessons in the art of hairwork "A. Speight, Artist in Hair; Begs to inform ladies and gentlemen desirous of being practically instructed in...the Art of Working in Hair; that he [emphasis mine] will...wait upon them at their residences" (p. 122). Thus, Speight may well have been a man, which would be in keeping with the common practice of men owning hairworking ateliers, even though they were primarily staffed by women.

(18.) Vol. 41 (December 1850), p. 377.

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