

Shine on



A sign of status, a functional adornment, a purely decorative flourish – jewellery serves many purposes. It's also deeply personal and symbolic, a way to capture in the present the essence of those who have gone before

Thin, soft and dull, the plain gold band looked unremarkable. Yet for its reluctant new custodian, these visible signs of wear and tear reflected the life of a remarkable woman whose hands had borne many years of rinsing out cloth nappies, washing up after every family meal and cleaning other people's houses. Those hands had also given a gentle squeeze of reassurance on the first day of school, confidence after another teenage heartbreak and comfort after the death of a beloved father.

Down the decades and across the globe, many will have experienced similarly powerful emotions upon inheriting an item of jewellery. A ring, watch or necklace is, after all, so much more than the financial value of its metals, stones and craftsmanship. It's a connection to those who have gone before, often symbolising love or devotion. As well as inherited items, however, this power is represented in mourning jewellery, which enjoyed huge popularity between the 17th and 20th centuries. It was created to honour a deceased ruler or loved one – and later came to be a profitable industry – but it's the humanity at its core that connects it, and us, to a timeless tradition.

Early examples

There's evidence of commemorative jewellery dating back as far as neolithic times. Artefacts uncovered by a multinational team of scientists at Çatalhöyük, an early urban settlement in southern Turkey, active from 7400-5200BCE, suggest that dwellers made necklaces of human teeth by drilling holes into the molars of the deceased. The researchers concluded that the teeth were

likely to have had 'deep symbolism' attached to them. Further discoveries across the globe (see overleaf) reveal that such symbolism has remained over time, albeit in different objects.

The evolutionary timeline of mourning jewellery in Europe is shaped by a complex patchwork of art, cultural, religious, family and social values, which has both divided and united society, encouraging people to reflect on their own life as well as the lives of their loved ones.

Religious and secular trends

Religion played a particularly significant role after the resolution of the great schism in the 13th century – ecclesiastical jewellery was a precursor to pieces being worn both to honour the life of a loved one and express the wearer's faith and values. Such pieces were popular among the devout and included figures such as the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist, or references to them.

While earlier religious jewels reflected the belief that heaven was the reward for living a life of piety, conversely, mourning rings engraved with skeletons and the Latin text *memento mori*, which translates as 'remember you must die', later reminded those left behind to cherish their time with loved ones on Earth.

One of the earliest-known examples of a *memento mori* mourning ring dates back to the late 15th century. It has skulls either side of a heart, a worm and the name 'Iohes Godefroy' engraved around the hoop. Bones and symbols denoting decay were a common reminder of humanity's ephemeral existence.

Other secular examples followed the controversial execution of King Charles I in 1649, after a bitter dispute between royalists and parliamentarians. His death resulted in a surge of memorial jewellery, as fragments of his hair and shreds of his bloodied shirt were placed within commemorative pieces. Lockets encasing his portrait were also worn as talismans by his devotees, who kept them hidden to avoid persecution by the law.

The locket had been popularised in the previous century, and the rise of portraiture added to the trend of wearing depictions of loved ones close to the heart, with so-called miniature portraits worn outwardly, as an expression of one's allegiance, or within a locket, as a private token of devotion. After Queen Elizabeth I's death in 1603, for example, her diamond ring was discovered to have a secret compartment in which she kept a picture of her mother, Anne Boleyn.

Creative symbolism

These miniature portraits and images inspired a new era of symbolism, representing both love and grief. Scenes included the bereaved as well as the deceased, with the latter's name often engraved on the item. Rings, lockets, brooches and hair slides might also have contained lattices of the deceased's hair, a tactile as well as a biological reminder of a person's life. Lovers, meanwhile, often chose to commission or create pieces that used locks from them both, as a sign of eternal love. Artists and jewellery makers also used human hair to create funereal images, such as weeping willows. Other images of

the time included cherubs, urns, ships and anchors, the last two representing passage for the departed and hope for the bereaved. They were commonly carved from jet, but white enamel represented a maiden or child, while pearls sometimes symbolised tears for the loss of a child.

Personal remembrance

Jewellery historian Hayden Peters, from Melbourne, Australia, began collecting Victorian jewellery while visiting antiques stores when he was young. Now a curator of mourning jewels, as well as the developer of online teaching platform The Art of Mourning, he says: 'I saw a ring that said "in memory of" for [a woman called] Mary Ann Lewis, who passed away in 1853. I thought it was the most loving thing someone could do for anyone. If their memory is alive, so are they.' For Hayden, it's the personal message that makes these pieces valuable. In his view, 'a lock of hair [is] more important than any diamond'.

Queen Victoria might well have agreed. Plunged into deep mourning by the death of the Prince Consort, Albert, in 1861, she committed to wear mourning dress for the rest of her days and was never without a locket containing her late husband's hair.

The value placed on the lock of a loved one's hair is also seen in literature. For example, in Charles Dickens' 1838 novel, *Oliver Twist*, the orphan's late mother has a locket containing two locks of hair and a plain gold wedding ring – a literary motif for his identity. And in Emily Brontë's 1847 novel,



Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff places some of his own hair in Catherine's locket as she lies waiting for burial, suggesting his longing for a reunion in the afterlife.

Changing times

Up until the 19th century, in England, elaborate bereavement formalities had been largely limited to the aristocratic and affluent, but economic and industrial advances meant mourning accessories slowly became accessible to those further down the economic ladder and, for some, they offered greater social acceptance and a stronger sense of identity.

'Having a pauper's funeral in the mid-19th century was considered shameful for the family,' explains Hayden, 'even when they struggled to conform to the two-and-a-half year standard of mourning dress and behaviour [...]. High mortality rates, increasing urbanisation and industrialisation led to commercial production of such pieces, as well as a greater demand to be seen in society wearing it.'

Emotional ties

Traditional mourning customs and fashions began to decline in the early 20th century. Today, whether – and how – people choose to display a period of mourning is a personal decision. At the state funeral for Queen Elizabeth II last September, for example, various members of the royal family wore items of the late monarch's jewellery, including Princess Charlotte, who was reported to have worn a diamond-studded horseshoe brooch that originally belonged to the late Queen's own mother.

Others may still choose to integrate a physical reminder of a loved one into an item of jewellery, be it a lock of hair or some of their ashes (see overleaf for some personal stories).

Lora Leedham, a Birmingham-based jewellery designer, is often asked to remodel the jewellery of deceased loved ones. 'People feel comforted by wearing pieces that preserve memories,' she says. 'Jewellery helps the wearer feel close or connected to the person whose memory they wish to preserve. When customers bring me a jewellery box full of pieces, they will always pull out each item and remember the memory attached – who had bought it for them, when they had it, what it symbolised...'

'It's emotional, and I have a huge responsibility to get it right, which is why I regularly take photos [of my work] and keep the person updated along the way. That way, they can see the journey of their sentimental pieces. Hopefully, one day, they will also be passed on and may start another journey again.'

Although a far cry from antique lockets, contemporary memorial and sentimental jewellery – from redesigned heirlooms and fused wedding bands to dried forget-me-nots and ashes suspended in time, the message is the same – love knows no bounds, even in death.

Words: Cat Thompson

For more information about Hayden's work, visit artofmourning.com. Follow Lora on Instagram @loraledhamjewellery

TIMELESS SYMBOLISM

Different customs, old and new, from around the globe

Roman influence

The Victorians may have taken it to their hearts, but they weren't the first to display a fondness for jet. It was heralded by ancient Roman philosophers for its protective qualities – reports tell of jet amulets being discovered in ancient grave sites across the UK and mainland Europe. Gorgoneia, carvings of the gorgons of Greek myth, with snakes for hair – were dated around the 3rd and 4th century CE and indicate funerary rites to ensure protection in the afterlife.

French sentimentality

While 19th-century England was overcome with dramatic mourning jewellery, continental Europeans were taken by more genial 'sentimental jewellery'. Popular designs included 'Regard' pieces, thought to originate from French jeweller Jean-Baptiste Mellerio in the late 18th century. The sentiment of 'Regard', or 'to remember', was created through the use of gemstones beginning with the same letter – ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, ruby and diamond. Variations included 'J'adore' and 'Dearest'.

South Korean honour

Ancient beliefs play a part in the relatively modern South Korean custom of 'funeral beads', a popular way to honour late loved ones. Some families choose to turn ashes into colourful, glossy beads which are kept in glass containers or dishes. While not worn as jewellery, the eye-catching gems allow families to keep watch over a loved one and ensure passage to the afterlife, which is considered an important responsibility from ancient times.

Swiss innovation

Over the past decade, technological advances have enabled the creation of cremation or memorial diamonds. Developed by Swiss company Algordanza, the gems are created by applying heat and pressure to ashes and hair, following a similar formula to that used in crafting diamonds.



CLOSE TO THE HEART

Five people reveal the meaning behind their most cherished pieces

Tracy

'My husband, Gary, died aged 55, a few weeks after discovering he had a brain tumour. We'd been together for 37 years and married for 30. Both our wedding rings and my engagement ring were looking a little fragile, so I decided to have them melted into one. I was so sad to leave behind the rings at the jewellers, as it felt like I was leaving part of Gary behind. But when I collected my new ring, I was over the moon. It brings me such joy and comfort to know all our love and memories are held inside it somehow.'

Gurminder

'I lost my mum suddenly. After the hospital called to say she'd left us, we took her belongings home and found her tweezers in her coat pocket. My mum loved her tweezers and, as she was leaving for hospital, asked for them. This reassured us she was okay and made us chuckle – who asks for a pair of tweezers if they're seriously ill? They're now on my desk and I plan to have them turned into a brooch. They might be a small, everyday object, but now they mean the world to me.'

Alena

'When I lost my beloved dog Lucas, I couldn't imagine never having him with me again. I liked the idea of always carrying a piece of him with me and decided to have an ashes ring made with a small black heart. My husband had a bracelet made with a paw bead containing his ash. Now we both have Lucas always with us, making sure we're okay.'

Sonia

'My mum died suddenly after being diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer while living in Canada. When she first emigrated there, I bought her a bracelet with a forget-me-not charm – a special symbol for us that meant "I love you", so it seemed only fitting to have Mum's ashes encased in a forget-me-not pendant. I cannot put into words how much comfort it brings me, knowing she's near me. It's the first thing I touch when I wake up and the last thing before I go to sleep.'

Rachel

'My mother-in-law died when my girls were young, but they still have fond memories of her. As they grew up, we decided to have Granny's wedding and engagement rings melted down and remodelled into two new pieces, as a special gift for the girls when each of them reached their 21st birthday. The girls wanted the reworked rings to share the original gold and gems, and to look similar but not identical – like sisters. Now, they both feel they always have a little of Granny with them as well as having "sister rings".'

ILLUSTRATIONS: DEANIRA D'ANTONI

