

Feature



Hair Jewelry and Hair Art in the Victorian Era **Lisa Ashton**

An expert on the apparel and the customs of the Victorian era offers a gentle introduction to the lost art of jewelry and other art pieces made from human hair.

Jewelry in the Victorian era was characterized by its diversity, not only of the materials of which it was made, which ranged from thermoplastic to precious metals, pearls, gemstones and all manner of objects, but by its symbolism. Victorians loved ornamentation; for those that could not afford gold or authentic gem stones, there was a great deal of cheap jewelry available.

Hair jewelry, now primarily thought of as “Victorian mourning jewelry”, was not always a symbol of mourning, but was sentimental or romantic. Locketts of hair from a child or a soldier were often tucked behind tintypes in Union photographic cases, or tied with bows and kept in jewelry boxes or exchanged as keepsakes.

This article is meant only to be introductory, as there are many good sources on the subject. In general, I am speaking from what I have learned from my own

small collection of actual pieces of hair jewelry, and references.

One will recall the emotional scene from the Civil War era novel *Little Women*, when sister Jo rushes out of the house upon learning that Father has been wounded. She returns home having had her luxuriant hair cut off to earn the sum of \$25 to enable her mother to travel to Washington to care for him. “Oh!”, cried Amy, “your one beauty!”



Union case with daguerrotype of lady with lock of hair found after the photograph, tin frame, and glass were removed. Sometimes fabric scraps were found as well. All artifacts and jewelry from collection of the author unless noted.



Victorian porcelain hair receiver, probably from China.

The Victorians’ regard for hair is summarized in the May 1855 issue of Godey’s *Lady’s Book*: “Hair is at once the most delicate and lasting of our material and survives us like love...so escaping from the idea of death...that we...may almost say ‘I have a piece of thee here, not unworthy of thy being now.’” Friendship or keepsake books and “Hair Albums” became a popular way of preserving the types of weaves and flowers created with hair.

Hair jewelry was considered “sentimental jewelry.” The hair could come from a relative, child or a close friend; one’s own hair was saved in “hair receivers” after brushing, and carefully combed out for use. It is not unusual to find small bundles of hair

packets in old Victorian books and boxes that were clearly meant for this use; nor was it unknown to use the hair of a beloved pet. Jewelry containing hair includes necklaces, earrings, pendants, lockets, brooches, bracelets, watch chains (very common), and rings. The most unusual piece I've acquired is the small hairwork "spring pin" (below).

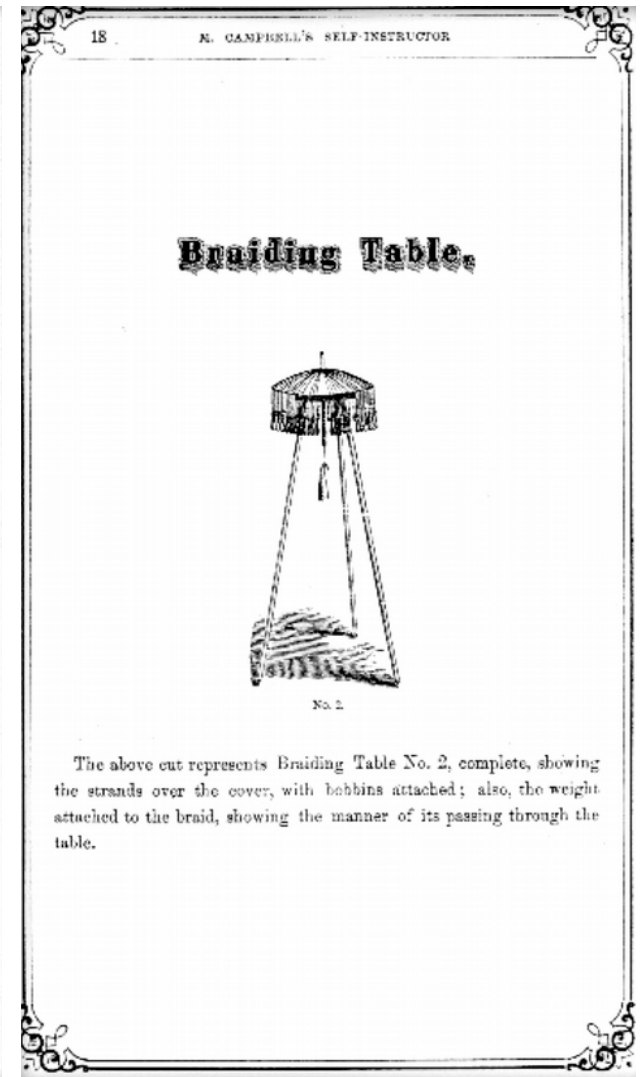
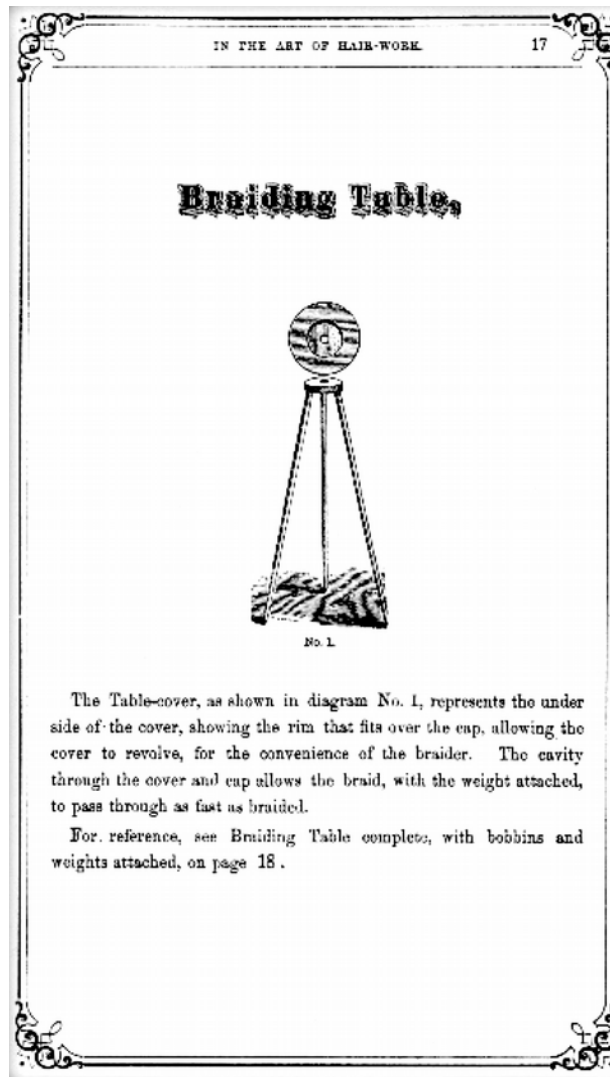


Hairwork "spring pin" with gold.

Even buttons were made of hair enclosed with mesh. Occasionally very long hair was braided into long plaits and sewn onto cuffs or collars as trim, or used to make a belt chain. These long knot work pieces were accomplished by using a special "braiding table", with similarities to both bobbin lace work surfaces and the more contemporary kumihimo braiding table, using weighted bobbins and a center lead weight for the finished braided rope. In Mr. Mark Campbell's 1875 "self instruction" book, *The Art of Hairwork* (right), are drawings of the "Braiding Table" to construct.

In Mr. Campbell's instructions, the hair strands were gathered together, smoothed and dampened (and treated with certain adhesive types of mixtures), and then braided or knotted over various metal or soft "forms" in different patterns of twists, weaves, cables and chains. This process was

similar to current kumihimo braiding techniques, and Godey's published patterns and instructions for creating these pieces at home (the instructions which are quite familiar-appearing to those who have attempted kumihimo braiding).



Drawings of braiding table from Mark Campbell's 1875 instruction book *The Art of Hairwork*.

There are also instructions for “open-weave” designs, in which the woven hair designs create a bubble- or sphere-like form. The “acorn” design for these was especially popular. The fiber ends were captured into findings, most often gold or gold-plated, which were available via catalogs like the one below.

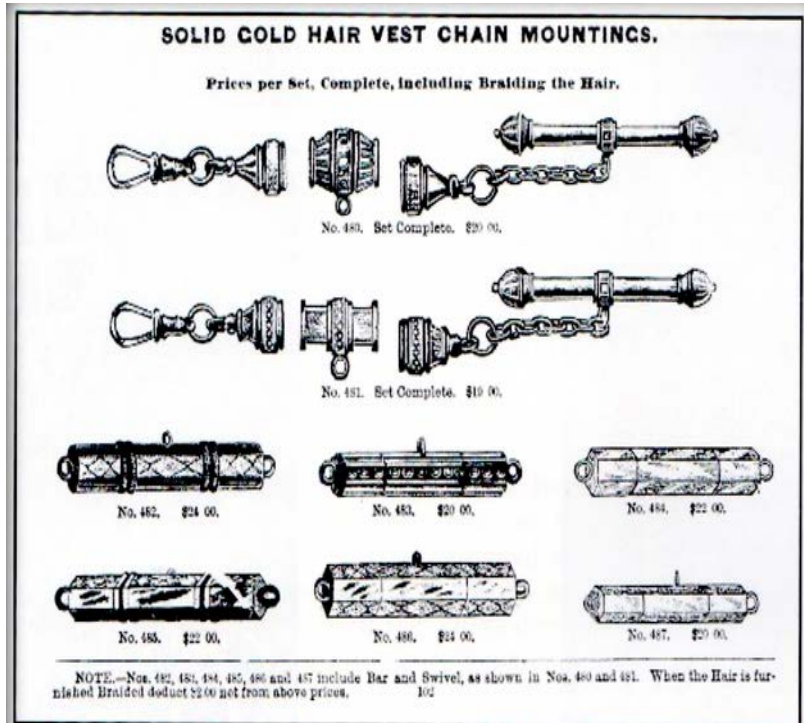


Plate 151. E. V. Rodin 1886 catalog.

A few of the available findings for hair jewelry creations from a catalog of the time. *Collectors Encyclopedia of Hairwork Jewelry.*

Hair was knotted and “palette-worked” into pictures, some miniatures made for brooches and pendants, and some small or larger “dioramas” or collages framed under glass, called “Hair Wreaths”. Common elements were flowers and trees

(weeping willows were popular). Curled feathers were also common. Victorian symbolism was in full play – the type of flowers or image pictured revealing the true message. Sometimes hair bundles of many people were used together; or

contrasting colors of hair could be woven or braided to make the piece. A single piece of jewelry or a hair wreath could contain the hair of family members or friends saved over many years.

Victorian hairwork jewelry has its roots in the wearing of *Memento Mori* (“Remember you must die”) jewelry dating from centuries ago, which included images of skulls, crossed bones, and caskets as reminders of death.

These images are seen consistently through the ages; although as mentioned, Victorian hairwork jewelry was not limited to its association with death. It could be divided into four general categories: Commemorative, Mourning and Memorial,



Above: Two braided hair ropes for fobs, with no findings and exhibiting the tied and glued ends. **Below:** 7 inch hair “diorama” from Germany, dated 1895, in a simple flower design. The hair for this was gathered, coated with clear shellac-like material, and cut into petal and leaf shapes then assembled into the final image.



Table worked open-weave bracelet with agate cabochon in gold slide clasp center. Several different styles of weaves noted.

Sentimental, and Decorative.

Commemorative use dates back at least to the 17th century and jewelry made with the hair of Charles I. Hair jewelry often signified a heroic or victorious event, a marriage, a conquest in love, even a business partnership – often represented by a sheaf of wheat to denote a prosperous union.

Use of hair as mourning jewelry dates back to at least the 14th Century and was well-established by the Victorian Era. The Industrial Revolution of the mid-19th Century catalyzed the availability of jewelry “blanks” in which the hair, knotted, braided or table-worked, could be embedded and then glass bezel fitted over the piece.



Queen Victoria herself greatly popularized these styles; in early 1861 she lost her own mother, then later the same year, her beloved husband Albert died, leaving her in perpetual mourning. Victoria was fond of giving jewelry made from her own hair, and such pieces were held in very high esteem, thus hairwork became extremely fashionable during this time.

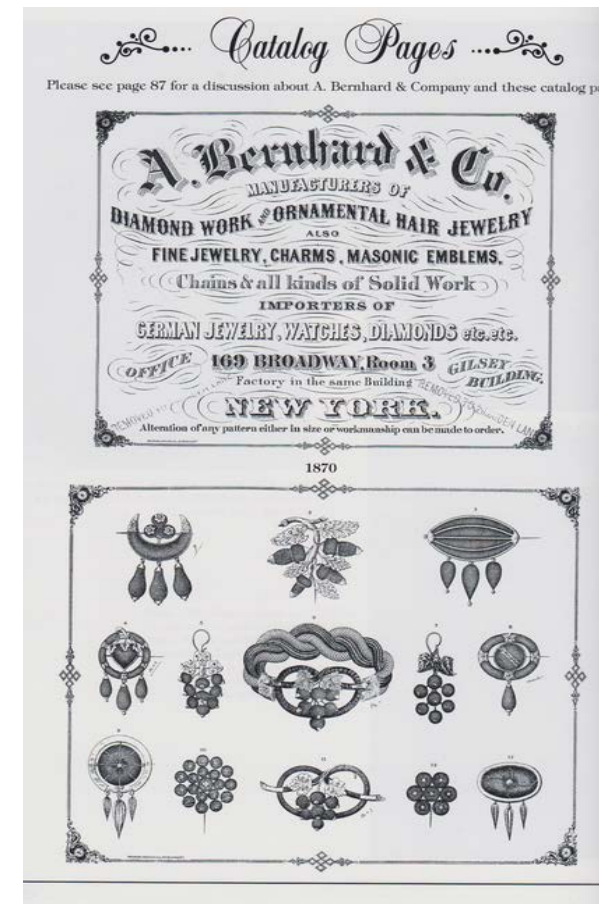
Hairwork jewelry could be made at home, as per Mr. Campbell's instructions for the Braiding table, or it could be ordered from



Both sides of a swivel locket, a gem tintype, and a simple flat woven design on the opposite side.

voluminous catalogs of the time to order, with the customer supplying the hair itself. It was relatively expensive for the time, when ordered from a jewelry or department store catalog.

To us in the 21st century, hair jewelry and hair wreaths are emblematic of a Victorian sensibility; jewelry and decorations that were exceedingly sentimental and brought back emotional memories were highly regarded. Besides the



Page from hair jewelry catalog, 1870.



Hairwork jewelry from 2015 Civilian Symposium at Harrisburg a conference about 1860's life and fashion.

person from whom the hair came, there was symbolism in the flowers and other images pictured (vines, folded hands, etc). It was a very symbolic age.

These wonderful pieces of history are still to be found as treasures of many families. I have gradually acquired my own varied pieces through years of attending flea markets and antique auctions. I have tried to search for a variety to display the many different kinds of pieces, from a larger hair wreath, to bracelets, watch chains, buttons, and earrings.

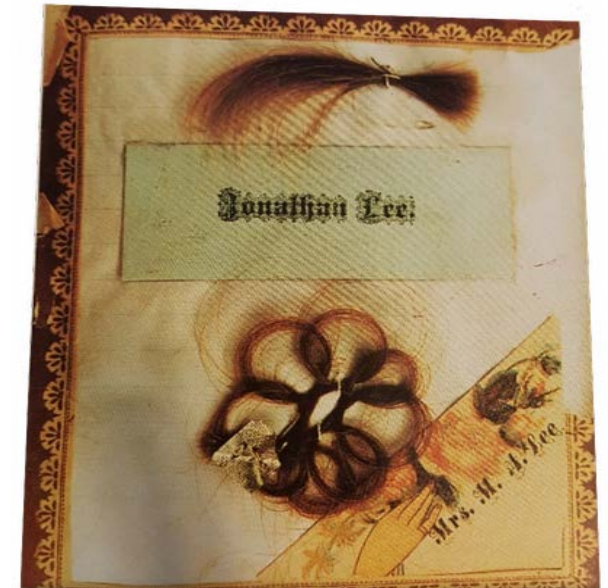
There are a few craftspeople who still make and repair hair jewelry pieces, using the traditional techniques, as described in the works listed in the bibliography. I met one of these ladies two years ago, at the "Civilian Symposium at Harrisburg", a conference devoted to the American Civil War time period, focusing on its dress and culture. Her work was quite lovely but extremely painstaking, and it takes her months to finish a complex piece.

Many items of hair jewelry are available online at places like Ebay and Etsy. Some are priced reasonably, but many are quite expensive. Hair watch chains are the most frequently seen, but brooches like the one below are also commonly available.

Hair is an organic material, (although not technically 'alive'), so it is of course vulnerable to mold and insects. The gold or silver parts can be carefully cleaned, and the items should be stored in a cool, dry area.



Lyre-shaped brooch with open weave hair pattern along edges.



Page from Lee Family Hair Album, Leila's Hair Museum





Large hairwork wreath, c. 1880's; handworked flowers made with hair of many individuals.

Bibliography

C. Jeanette Bell, *Collector's Encyclopedia of Hairwork Jewelry*. Collector Books, Shroeder Publishing, Paducah, KY, 1998.

Mark Campbell, *The Art of Hair Work, Hair Braiding and Jewelry of Sentiment*, as supplemented with excerpts from Godey's Lady's Magazine, originally published in 1875, the Godey's supplements published between 1850 to 1859; Reproduction text. LACIS Publications, Berkeley, CA, 1996.

Helen Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America*. Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

Leila's Hair Museum [website](#).

Art of Hairwork Collection [website](#).

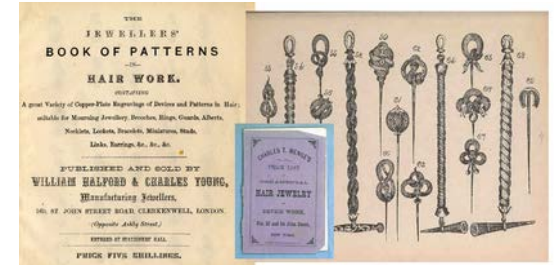
Lisa Ashton is a Fantasy/SF and Historical costumer since 1989. Almost 30 years on, she is still designing and building costumes to make people laugh, cry, and gasp in wonder. She is the founder and curator of Miss Lizzy's Traveling Historical Fashion Show, an ICG Special Interest Group, which collects and preserves Victorian-era garments and artifacts for study, and brings exhibits to conventions. She is a Physician Assistant for over 30 years, now semi-retired. Lisa has been Program Director for several Costume Cons, and on con panels on a variety of topics for many years. She loves to teach beadwork and vintage sewing techniques, and talk about where ideas originate. Visit Miss Lizzy's on [Facebook](#).



Table worked open-weave bracelet with agate cabochon in gold slide clasp center. Several different styles of weaves noted.

Cooper-Hewitt Library Hair Jewelry Pattern Books

The Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt Museum Library recently digitized two books in its collection on hair jewelry.



The Jeweler's Book of Patterns in Hair Works was published in 1864 by William Halford and Charles Young, Manufacturing Jewellers. According to its cover page, it contains, "a great variety of copper-plate engravings of devices and patterns in hair, suitable for mourning jewellery, brooches, rings, guards, necklets, lockets, bracelets, miniatures, studs, links, earrings, &c, &c, &c."

Charles T. Menge's Price List of Ornamental Hair Jewelry and Device Works, published by the firm in 1873, is a catalog of hairwork jewelry designed for use in mourning, freemasonry, etc. Some of the designs incorporate enamelwork, metalwork, pearls etc. It was issued together with an album of engraved plates depicting 716 items.

Both books are available to download from the Internet Archive in formats including PDF, Epub, and Kindle.