Life Cut Short: Hamilton’s Hair and the Art of Mourning Jewelry
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Selected PR Images

As a token of affection or a memorial to a lost loved one, human hair has long been incorporated into objects of adornment. Life Cut Short looks at the history of hair and mourning jewelry through a display of approximately 60 bracelets, earrings, brooches, and other accessories from New-York Historical’s collection. Also on display: miniaturist John Ramage’s hair working tools and ivory sample cards with selections of hair designs, period advertisements, instruction and etiquette books, magazines, and illustrations of hair-braiding patterns.

Unidentified maker
Mourning ring containing lock of Alexander Hamilton’s hair presented to Nathaniel Pendleton by Elizabeth Hamilton, 1805
Gold, hair
New-York Historical Society, Gift of Mr. B. Pendleton Rogers, 1961.5a

Hair from prominent figures was collected and given to friends and close associates. This ring contains the hair of Alexander Hamilton. While on his deathbed, Hamilton’s wife Elizabeth clipped locks of his hair to preserve as mementoes for herself and her husband’s close friends.

Letter from Elizabeth Hamilton to Nathaniel Pendleton,
June 21, 1805, regarding presentation of the ring
Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, New-York Historical Society

In 1805, Elizabeth Hamilton presented the ring above to Nathaniel Pendleton, one of the executors of Hamilton’s will and the statesman’s second in the famous duel. In this letter, she requests that Pendleton wear the ring “in Remembrance of your beloved friend a precious Lock of his hair.”
John Ramage (ca. 1748−1802)

Mrs. John Pintard (Elizabeth Brasher, 1765–1838), 1787
Watercolor on ivory, gold, hair
New-York Historical Society, Gift of George Hancock Servoss, 1906.3

This miniature shows Elizabeth Pintard, the wife of New-York Historical founder John Pintard. The couple was among several distinguished clients Ramage painted after settling in New York. In an 1832 letter to his daughter, Pintard described his wife’s miniature as “a beautiful miniature & very accurate likeness of herself taken by Ramage.” Ramage decorated the miniature with hair work.

John Ramage (ca. 1748–1802)

Sample of hair jewelry designs used by miniaturist John Ramage, 1777−95
Ivory, watercolor, hair, leather, fabric
New-York Historical Society, Gift of an anonymous donor, 1947.461

Miniaturist John Ramage, active in New York from 1777 to 1794, created many works of “hair painting” and frequently incorporated locks of or chopped hair into his miniatures. Ramage used special tools to elaborately curl, weave, or chop the hair secured under glass within his elaborate gold cases.
Brooch and earrings, ca. 1820
Gold, other metal, silver, jet, glass, hair
New-York Historical Society, Gift of Mrs. J. Harper (Constance Schermerhorn) Skillin, 1956, INV.12673a-c

Proper mourning jewelry expanded beyond hair work to include pins, brooches, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and sleeve buttons made in black enamel, onyx, chalcedony, and jet.

Tiffany & Co. (1837−present), retailer
Mourning bracelet, New York, ca. 1854
Hair, gold, diamonds, silver, textile
New-York Historical Society, INV.774

Mourning jewelry was sold by many New York City jewelers. Tiffany & Co. sold a variety of mourning goods, including jewelry and special mourning stationary. This mourning bracelet memorializes Mary Elizabeth Morris, who died in 1851 at the age of 43. The bracelet was probably made with her hair as a keepsake for one of her daughters.

Unidentified maker
Watch chain, 1850−80
Hair, metal
Gift of Anna Roelker, 1940.89

Growing demand for mourning and jewelry spurred increased manufacturing of hair work. Whereas bereaved clients formerly brought family hair to jewelers or hair workers to be worked into bracelets, earrings, brooches, watch fobs, and stick pins, with commercial production clients feared that unscrupulous makers would swap their intimate samples for hair from anonymous sources.
Unidentified maker
**Brooch, ca. 1860**
Gold, enamel, pearls, hair
New-York Historical Society, INV.12650

*Pearls, which symbolized tears, were often used as borders for brooches and pendants.*