

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: The Most Beautiful Hair You've Very Seen

By Rachel Dice

Aurora Museum & Archives

The year is 1867. Your monarch, Queen Victoria, is in deep mourning and has been for the past six years. She wears nothing but black, and around her neck she wears a small choker necklace.

The necklace is obviously very special to her, because the pendant is made with her late husband, Prince Albert's, hair.

With her fully black clothing, it is obvious to the entire empire that she is a mourning widow. Her necklace made of hair tells the empire that she is mourning the loss of her beloved consort and is keeping him close to her heart.

Hair jewelry might sound slightly disturbing, but to the average Victorian, it was a fashionable and sentimental part of life.

Creating jewelry and ornaments using loved ones' hair was considered a respectable and commendable practice for middle- and upper-class ladies, right alongside practicing their watercolours and learning proper embroidery.

The entire concept was meant to act as a memory of your family and the sentimental connections you shared with them.

In many cases, this meant taking a clipping of their hair and using it to create art that is often breathtakingly beautiful and intricate. Clips of hair were woven, braided, and wrapped in stunningly detailed work and occasionally set alongside diamonds and pearls, if the crafter was rich enough.

Just imagine: your wife has the most beautiful hair you've ever seen. You've never seen a colour quite like it, and you're certain you never will again.

Soon after your marriage, she presents you with a pocket watch, customized so the lid is embellished with an intricately woven circle of her hair kept safe under glass or resin. She has woven it so tightly and perfectly that it looks like the finest silk, and all through your day you take it out to check the time and admire the beautiful art your wife gave to you. Even when you're apart, you know she is close to your heart. It's wonderfully romantic.

While hair jewelry was popular both as tokens of love and as memories after death, hair art could also be used in other ways to decorate the home. Hair could also be woven and twisted into delicate flowers and sprigs and set in the shape of a wreath.

These wreathes were often made with hair from both living and deceased family members, and while they were certainly a part of mourning practices, they were also often used as sentimental family trees.

One such wreath was made by Jean Malloy (b.1796, d.1857), an Auroran resident. The wreath made use of hair from many members of her family and is an enduring representation of her love and regard for them.

If your curiosity is piqued, then why not swing by the Aurora Museum & Archives for their new exhibition The Wardrobes of Aurora: Dressing for Birth, Death, and Everything In Between.

Opening on March 7, the exhibition will show Jean Malloy's hair wreath along with other examples of this beautiful and strange tradition.