

# Human Hair Ornaments



OF ALL THE fads and fashions which flourished in the Victorian era, that of creating and wearing ornaments made of human hair ranks among the oddest and one of the more macabre. Although professional hair workers created some of the jewelry and decorations, ladies began to consider hair art an "elegant accomplishment" in the mid-1800s. Patiently and laboriously, they would weave, knit, plait, mold, braid, crochet, and otherwise torture strands of hair into a variety of shapes and devices. At the height of the fashion, necklaces and collars clasped the fair, modishly bare, feminine throat, and bracelets and rings encircled delicate wrists and fingers; hair stickpins and studs fastened the masculine cravat and shirt cuffs; and wreaths fashioned from hair darkly and lugubriously decorated the parlor.

Hair work originated in Europe — especially in England and France — and found its way to the United States, and eventually to the growing metropolitan centers of Minnesota, in the mid-1800s. Fortunately, many excellent and representative examples of this art have been given to the Minnesota Historical Society and are preserved in the museum collection. The society has hundreds of hair items in a large variety of forms. A few were made of the hair of, or worn by, well-known Minnesotans: Josiah Snelling, William Watts Folwell, Alexander Ramsey, and the daughter of territorial Governor Willis A. Gorman. While other pieces may not carry that distinction, they are often superb, and in their own somber way beautiful, examples of this unusual art.

The locks of children and lovers, of saints and heroes, have traditionally been preserved as mementos. It was but a small step, in the early years of the eighteenth century, to begin to preserve locks of hair of the deceased in mourning jewelry. Mourning rings were already popular with the upper classes. They were often entwined or embellished with strands of hair of the recently departed.<sup>1</sup>

Mourning medallions and lockets also became popular. Locks of hair were often mounted in a locket, sometimes surrounding a silhouette of the loved one. The monogram of the dead person might be executed in his or her hair on the back of the locket. More elaborate was

<sup>1</sup> Lillian C. Bragg, "Hair and Mourning Jewelry," in *Hobbies — The Magazine for Collectors*, October, 1945, p. 12-13, 117; Mary Martin, "Glooms and 'Hair-Looms,'" in *House and Garden*, December, 1928, p. 67-71, 134, 138; Janis Obst, "Hair Wreaths and Ornaments," in *Gopher Historian*, Winter, 1966-67, p. 8-9; Mrs. Stewart McCormack, "Elegant Accomplishments," in *Missouri Historical Society, Bulletin*, 3:212-14 (April, 1965).

the use of hair to "paint" pictures in a medallion or a ring. Hair was chopped very fine, almost to a powder, then sprinkled on a picture or design to which glue had been applied. Another similar method was to lay colorless wax paper coated with glue over the chopped hair, then to cut it into designs to form pictures. The mournful scenes thus typically depicted an inconsolable widow leaning on a tombstone, children praying in a churchyard, or a faithful dog sitting near a grave — all almost invariably framed by a weeping willow tree. These gloomy but delicate scenes look so much like the pictures painted in sepia and grisaille which were popular at that time that it is difficult to distinguish them without a magnifying glass.<sup>2</sup>

ALL THIS WAS mild compared with what followed. One expert on the Victorian era writes: "In endowing the human race with hair, Nature unwittingly contributed to the nineteenth century a substance which could not have been improved upon for the intimate expression of sentimental feeling. . . . It remained for the flamboyant Victorian imagination to develop to the full the possibilities of hair as a decorative material."<sup>3</sup>

Imagination was just one element in the mixture of reasons which led to the popularity of hair art in the nineteenth century. It was an age in which women took pride in their long tresses and men wore their hair to their collars. Thus there was an abundance of material — light, pliable, yet tough and therefore eminently suitable to work into intricate but durable designs and ornaments. It was an age in which "everyone viewed the world through a thick haze of emotion."<sup>4</sup> It was a time in which good taste was all too often overwhelmed by the quest for the sentimental, the unusual, and the bizarre. Perhaps not least, it was a period when upper-class women in particular — confined to rigid social codes and mores and by and large relegated to the status of a child and an ornament — found some peculiar outlets for boredom and restlessness. It was in this atmosphere that *Godey's Lady's Book* could seriously address its audience: "Hair is at once the most delicate and lasting of our materials and survives us, like love. It is so

light, so gentle, so escaping from the idea of death, that, with a lock of hair belonging to a child or friend, we may almost look up to heaven and compare notes with angelic nature — may almost say: 'I have a piece of thee here, not unworthy of thy being now.'"<sup>5</sup>

*Godey's Lady's Book* provided some instructions for would-be hair artists. In the December, 1850, issue of the magazine — in the first of two articles informing its readers on the intricacies of hair art — the new pastime was called a recent importation from Germany. "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." Some general directions for working with hair were given, along with a few illustrated patterns and instructions for bracelets, rings, earrings, and watch chains.<sup>6</sup>

By 1859, the "elegant accomplishment" warranted a series of monthly articles in *Godey's Lady's Book*. The articles presented information on the preparation of the hair, necessary equipment, and basic steps in weaving, plaiting, and molding hair. "An ingenious hair worker will think of many little domestic articles which could be either made of hair or ornamented with it," one *Godey's* article said. It went on to suggest bracelets, brooches, earrings, finger rings, chains, necklaces, shawl pins, cravat pins, purses, bags, bookmarks, pencil cases, guards, studs, stud chains, scent bottles, and riding whips.<sup>7</sup>

The equipment needed to make hair art was modest. In addition to the hair itself (it was apparently up to the ingenuity and persuasiveness of the lady to acquire this), all that was required was a frame, thread, bobbins, and molds, all of which were "already in every one's possession." A frame could be made out of a bandbox or a hat with a flat top, the bobbins out of small bags filled with shot or pennies. The molds could be as simple as wire, pencils, brass tubes, and round rulers. Knitting needles and a pair of scissors were the only other items needed. A few designs required a special mold, but "Any turner [lathe worker] will make these from a drawing."<sup>8</sup>

Basic steps for just about all hair art sound essentially similar. The cut hair was fastened into a bundle (if necessary, it was washed first with soda to remove grease), from which groups of hairs of ten, or twenty, or whatever the pattern called for, were drawn to form strands. The strands were tied to bobbins — metal weights or weighted bags — to prevent tangling and to help keep the strands in balance on the frame as they were worked. Almost all hair work was made around some firm object — a wire, a tube, a pencil — which kept the hair in place until it was fixed in that form by being boiled. After it was boiled it was carefully removed from the

<sup>2</sup> Martin, in *House and Garden*, December, 1928, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Lichten, *Decorative Art of Victoria's Era*, 192 (New York, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> Lichten, *Decorative Art*, 193.

<sup>5</sup> Lichten, *Decorative Art*, 193.

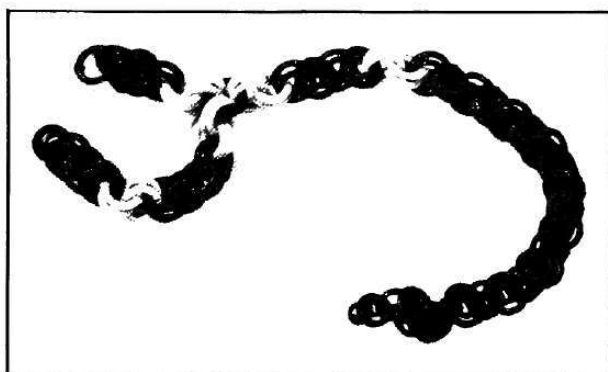
<sup>6</sup> *Godey's Lady's Book*, 41:377 (quote), 378-79 (December, 1850), 42:128-29 (January, 1851).

<sup>7</sup> *Godey's Lady's Book*, 58:123 (quote), 124 (February), 218-19 (March), 357-58 (April), 455-56 (May), 551-52 (June), 59:72-73 (July), 166-67 (August), 261 (September), 360 (October), 456 (November), 549 (December, 1859).

<sup>8</sup> *Godey's Lady's Book*, 58:123 (first quote) (February), 219 (second quote) (March, 1859).



*"BEADS" OF HAIR (above, left) form a necklace with a cross pendant, a popular design of the time. It was made in about 1860 of the hair of Louise Gorman Officer, daughter of Willis A. Gorman, second territorial governor of Minnesota. Above: This "corsage" is made entirely of human hair. Left: This man's watch fob is unusual not only for its linklike design but because of the strongly contrasting black and white hair used.*



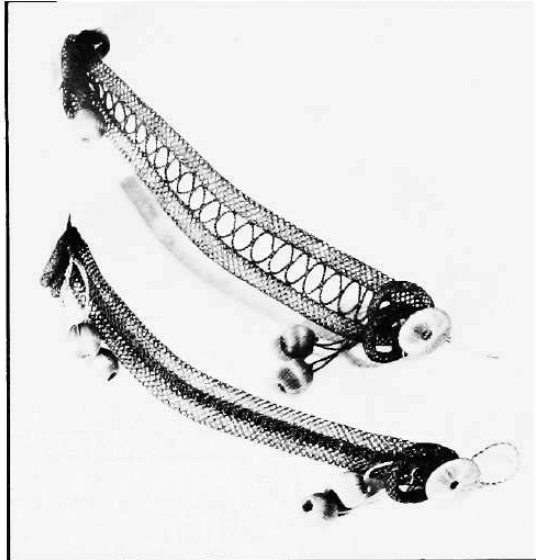
mold. When the plaiting was dried, the completed hair work was taken to a jeweler, who affixed the beads, tips, clasps, or whatever was needed to finish the piece.

HAIR WREATHS took vast amounts of time and an incredible degree of patience. Many of these popular decorations were undoubtedly done by professionals — former wigmakers, hairdressers, and persons who worked for jewelers. These decorative garlands were often huge. Sometimes hair workers, using the hair of the persons depicted, made wreaths to frame portraits and family pictures. There seems to be little information about how to make the flowers, leaves, and stems that went into these wreaths. A little book called *Art Recreations*, published in 1860, claimed to provide a

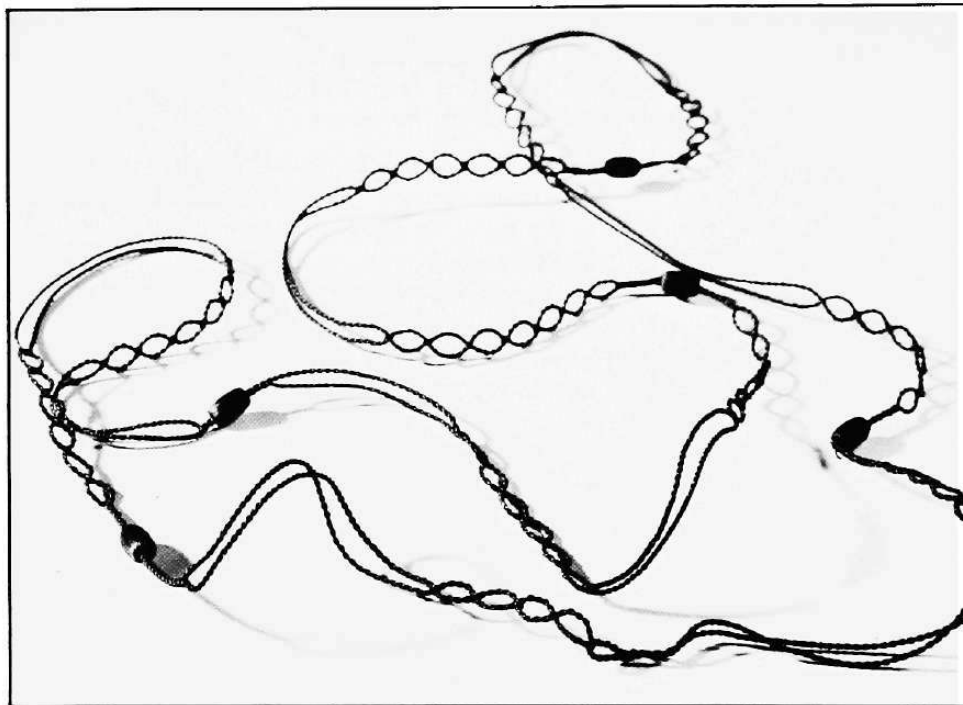
"complete guide" to thirty "recreations," including hair work. In two brief paragraphs, the authors explained how to make a leaf, then added, with a slight variation, one might make "daisies, asters, etc." It is well to have a pattern. If you can not see hair flowers, take natural ones . . . and endeavor to imitate Nature." Other instructions are equally cryptic: "Forget-me-not is a pretty little flower, and easy to make; put a gold bead in the middle. Roses require much time and great care; buds are easily made." And finally this advice: "Practice in this art is of more value than precept. The artist will

<sup>9</sup> L. B. Urbino, Henry Day, and Others, *Art Recreations: Being A Complete Guide*, 294–95 (quotes) (Boston, 1860).

*TWO BRACELETS made of brown hair differ in design, but both have contrasting beads and balls of blond hair.*



*THIS DELICATE chain, interspersed with hair beads, is a lady's watch guard.*



*EIGHT WATCH CHAINS show a little of the variety of weaving and plaiting methods. In some cases more than one kind of weaving was used on a single chain to achieve different textures.*

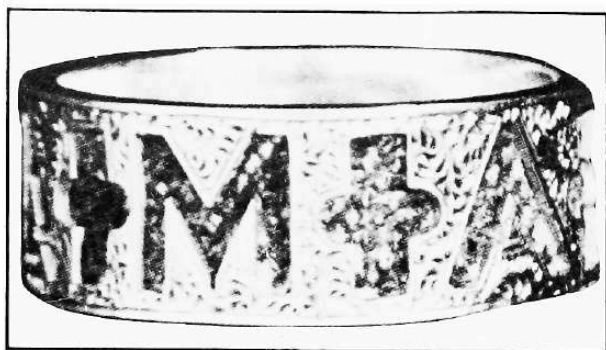
find the difficulties gradually disappear as the work is persevered in, and to study specimens of hair work, now so common, will assist the learner in many points.”<sup>9</sup>

Another popular parlor decoration was the family tree made up of the locks of hair of each member of the family. The society museum collection has an excellent example of such a genealogical hair tree. To each lock of hair forming the tree branches, boughs, and — incongruously — flowers, is attached a tiny bit of paper with a number on it. A list with corresponding numbers identifies each person in the family represented by a swatch of hair.

Today, the idea of wearing jewelry made of human hair, or making elaborate wreaths to hang on our walls for decoration, or fashioning a hair tree to be placed in the parlor under a glass bell, seems a bit morbid. There may be another reason to feel relieved that hair art has gone out of fashion. After examining a collection of pieces such as the museum owns, especially the large and elaborate wreaths, one tends to conclude with Frances Lichten that everyone “must have been eternally preoccupied with the thought of collecting and snipping fairly substantial locks from everyone with whom they came in contact; in no other way could they have acquired enough to make these beloved but melancholy garlands.”<sup>10</sup>

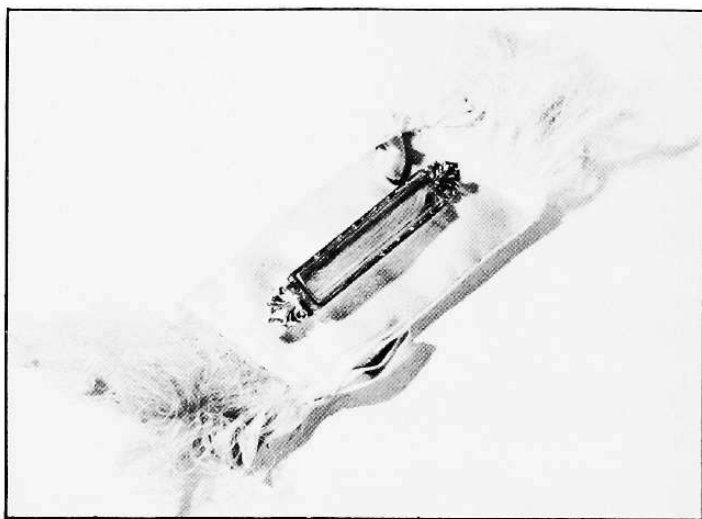
<sup>10</sup> Lichten, *Decorative Art*, 193 (quote).





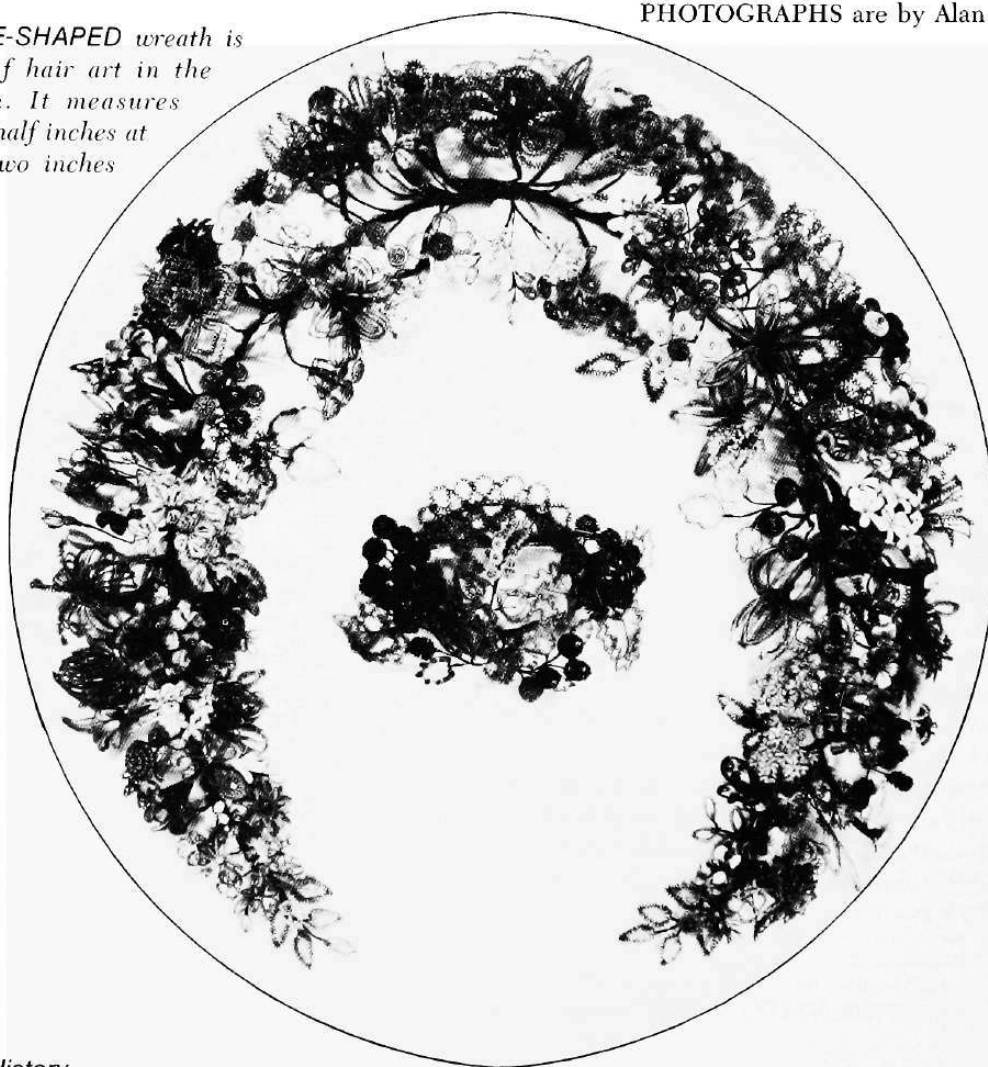
*DARK BROWN* hair makes the openworked letters, "Martha," and the crosses visible in this gold ring. The hair may be that of the lady's husband, and the ring itself is supposed to be a wedding band. Curiously, it might easily have been a fairly typical example of a memorial ring, although by 1860, the approximate date of this ring, hair jewelry was no longer used exclusively for mourning tokens.

*A LOCK OF HAIR* of Charles E. Furness, Jr., son of Charles E. and Marion Ramsey Furness and grandson of Alexander Ramsey, is under the glass in this heavy gold brooch. The boy died when he was less than one year old.



*THIS HORSESHOE-SHAPED* wreath is the largest piece of hair art in the museum collection. It measures twenty-three and a half inches at its widest; twenty-two inches at its deepest.

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