

THE HIDDEN MEANING OF HAIR IN PORTRAIT MINIATURES

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Perhaps no other form of jewellery holds such an intimacy as that of portrait miniatures and hairwork jewellery. These mediums when combined serve as object memory and represent the sincerity of the sitter in life and death. These items of adornment were created with precise detail and skill, as testament to a person loved or admired, whose likeness these tiny artworks aimed to capture. However, there is much more to these objects than a simple means of identification. So often, we see portrait miniatures set with the addition of the sitter's hair. The inclusion of hair within portrait miniatures holds many layered meanings and offers a tangible connection to the person in the portrait. To understand the importance of hair in these pieces, is to understand the deep sentimentality and affection for personal relic observed within Western European and Anglo-American history.

Portrait art of the quattrocento era of the Renaissance saw a distinct shift from the generic representation of everyday people

to an increased interest in individual identity. "After many centuries in which generic representation had been the norm, distinctive portrait likenesses began to reappear in Europe in the 15th century. The resurgence of portraiture was thus a significant manifestation of the Renaissance in Europe"[1]. Portrait miniatures were objects used to establish political or economic alliances or to aid in the arrangement of marriages and often had diplomatic significance.[2] This aesthetic shift towards the representation of the individual in portraiture, set in motion the desire for items of sentimentality, which would flourish in the centuries following.



Left to right: hairwork reverse of [portrait miniature of a Lady wearing a turban, c.1770](#), by Richard Cosway (1742-1821); hairwork reverse of [portrait miniature of a child possibly of the Graham family, 1786](#), by Diana Hill (née Dietz) (c. 1765-1844) - both The Limner Company.

The Romantic Period was born in revolution and spurred on in a flurry of art, literature, poetry, and music. Revolt against established monarchy and religious institutions were the shifting sands of societal change which became the foundation for the French Revolution. The aftermath of this social and political upheaval was the promotion of individualism and emotion. "Whereas during the Renaissance portrait miniatures had served political or economic marital alliances, in the 18th and early 19th centuries they cemented true romantic and familial attachment"[3]. The exchanging of human hair had long been practiced across Western cultures and is detailed in the poet works of English writer, John Donne, as early as the 16th century. Hair's resistance to decay alongside its ubiquitous and intimate nature, made it an appealing item to exchange during periods of separation, in a time which pre-dated the invention of photography. Art historian, Marcia Pointon, describes these long periods of absence as "institutionalised separation: the grand tour (leading to lengthy sojourns in Rome by young aristocratic men), military and naval campaigns, mercantile expansionism, and emigration generated the conditions for the production and circulation of portrait-objects"[4]. When we consider the act of gifting hair as a token of love or tangible 'forget-me-not', we understand the deep connection between the giver and the recipient.

It is important to understand the social context of hair gifting to appreciate the true sentiment behind these jewels. The giving of one's hair was regarded as the giving of one's self and was to be done with the upmost sincerity. Social etiquette developed around the practice of gifting hair; "a young unmarried woman could receive such a memento from male and female relatives and female friends, [however] she could accept one only from a man to whom she was betrothed. A young woman could exchange a lock of hair with an admirer at his request, but only if neither lock were set into jewellery"[5]. These social

parameters when observed retrospectively offer clues into the relationships between gift giver and recipient. "The hair's filament would transmit one's self to another, and as the recipient took possession of the gift, he or she accepted the giver's self"[6]. The social value placed upon hair made it a popular incorporation across almost every variety of jewellery and by the 18th century hairwork was used to make decorative backs to portrait miniatures worn as necklaces[7] (see for example [Victoria and Albert Museum P.98-1962](#)). The significance of gifting hair, alongside the material cost and labour intensity of producing portrait miniatures, alludes to the deep sentimental importance of these objects to the individuals depicted within them and their significance as object memory in documenting social connections of the time.



[Bracelet with nine lockets](#), one with a miniature of the left eye of Charlotte, Princess of Wales (1796-1817); early nineteenth century, British School - Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023

The deep sentimentality of portrait miniatures and the inclusion of hairwork made these objects even more significant upon the death of the sitter. The poignancy of hairwork serving as a relic of the deceased, coupled with a person's portrait or even a partial portraiture, as observed in 'lover's eye' jewellery, was often the only tangible connection left of a loved one. "Because hair does not decay, it was a way to immortalise loved ones back in the day. These objects were emblems of love that acted as personal records of family and friends, both living and deceased"[8]. The popularity to include hair in portrait miniatures, coincided with the fad for relic which had been perpetuated throughout Anglo-American and Western European culture by the Romantic movement. As this movement converged into the Victorian era, the catalyst for mourning jewellery erupted with Queen Victoria's own personal mourning of her husband, Prince Albert. This gave rise to an entire industry dedicated to hairwork and mourning fashion. "It was very fashionable to wear portrait medallions as jewellery at the end of the 18th century and into the first two decades of the 19th century...these two were used for mourning or as love tokens"[9]. Painted portrait miniatures began to fade into obscurity as the invention of photography took favour, however, the inclusion of hair mounted on the reverse of these portraits remained popular into the late Victorian era.

The inclusion of hair within the mountings of portrait miniatures was to represent the sincerity of the sitter and was transformed into relic upon their death. Together these items serve as poignant and tangible connections to those who came before us. The popularity of hair being incorporated within portrait miniature works is a testament to the transformation of these items, from tangible aids used to accommodate political or economic alliances, to items representing deep love and loss.

[1] Sorabella, J 2007, Portraiture in Renaissance and Baroque Europe, Blog post, August 2007, viewed 20 June 2023; <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/port/hd_port.htm>

[2] Sorabella, J 2007, Portraiture in Renaissance and Baroque Europe, Blog post, August 2007, viewed 20 June 2023; <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/port/hd_port.htm>

[3] Zohn, K 2011, 'Tokens of imperfect affection: portrait miniatures and hairwork in sense and sensibility', Jane Austen Society of North America; vol. 32, no. 1, viewed 19 June 2023; [Kristen Miller Zohn \(jasna.org\)](#)

[4] Pointon, M 2001, 'Surrounded with brilliants: miniature portraits in eighteenth-century England'; *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 83, no.1, pp 48-71.

[5] Zohn, K 2011, 'Tokens of imperfect affection: portrait miniatures and hairwork in sense and sensibility', *Jane Austen Society of North America*; vol. 32, no. 1, viewed 19 June 2023; [Kristen Miller Zohn \(jasna.org\)](https://www.jasna.org/)

[6] Sheumaker, H 2007, 'Love entwined: the curious history of hairwork in America', University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania.

[7] Gollar, K 2017, 5 things you didn't know about hairwork and portrait miniatures; Blog post, 26 May 2017, viewed 20 June 2023; [5 Things You Didn't Know about Hairwork and Portrait Miniatures - Cincinnati Art Museum](#)

[8] Gollar, K 2017, 5 things you didn't know about hairwork and portrait miniatures; Blog post, 26 May 2017, viewed 20 June 2023; [5 Things You Didn't Know about Hairwork and Portrait Miniatures - Cincinnati Art Museum](#)

[9] Luthi, A 1998, 'Sentimental jewellery', Shire Publications Ltd, Oxford.

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