

POLITICAL

IN CELEBRATION OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES MONTH

ECHOES

FROM THE SHELDON MUSEUM ARCHIVES

THE MATERIAL WORLD OF VICTORIAN MOURNING

As we reflect on the different kind of Halloween we experienced this year — overshadowed by the specters of both COVID-19 and a looming election — we are perhaps closer than ever to the historical origins of the holiday as a period of contemplation and remembrance. Halloween emerged from the medieval festival of Allhallowtide, a three-day Catholic celebration in memory of the holy departed. Naturally, mourning traditions have evolved since the Middle Ages and the Henry Sheldon Museum Archives offer some insight into how mourners in the time of museum founder Henry L. Sheldon (1821-1907) used material objects to cope with grief.

The Victorian era saw the rise of a material culture of mourning, or as Charles Dickens more acerbically described it, a “trade in death.” During the 19th century, mourning was a highly public affair that came with its own set of outfits, rituals and objects. Emotional displays of grief were stifled by rigid social decorum and so these highly regimented objects and protocols served as a physical stand-in for interior anguish. In short, mourning objects allowed grief to become tangible.

One of the objects in the Archives' collection



Mourning embroidery dating to the turn of the 19th century.

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is a mourning embroidery dating to the turn of the 19th century. An elegant woman leans against a tombstone, her face buried in a handkerchief. The fragile graveside scene is framed by two delicate trees — a white birch and a weeping willow — and the Gothic windows of a church are visible behind her. The embroidered gravestone records that “E.H.H.” died on Sept. 10, 1802, at the age of five months and 20 days, suggesting that the female figure is depicted mourning the loss of her child. Women in particular were subject to strictly proscribed social codes of mourning and objects like the Sheldon needlework sensitively visualize a scene of grief while adhering to public decorum.

Also in the Archives' collection is a hand-colored lithograph produced by printers Kellogg & Comstock of Hartford, Conn. In the image, a blank funerary monument offers a space for grieving families to inscribe the name and death date of a deceased loved one. Variations of these mourning prints were produced by Kellogg & Comstock, as well their New York competitors Currier & Ives, and the cross-section of mourners depicted in these prints can tell us something about their intended market. Graveside scenes that include both a man and woman, like the one discussed here, were likely intended for the loss of a child, as the inscription to the Sheldon print confirms: “Frank L. Bertrand died Aug 9 1854 Aged 20 months.” In contrast, a scene depicting a solitary woman might suggest that she had been recently widowed. These prints were a less laborious alternate to the hand-embroidered needlework of previous decades. Although the Sheldon embroidery is likely one-of-a-kind and the print, by nature of its medium, was widely replicated, both adhere to a fairly standard format of mourning scene, with weeping willows and distant churches as common accompanying motifs.

The lithograph, in this case, is fused with another Victorian tradition: the collection of human hair. A lock of blonde hair — presumably

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the deceased's — is pinned to the monument depicted in the print. Victorians often used human hair from friends and family in the construction of wreaths and jewelry referred to as “hairwork.” Such objects were often created as an act of mourning and the coil of hair affixed to the grave marker in the Sheldon print makes the mass-produced mourning scene more intimate and personalized.

The mourning print gained even more traction as the Civil War unfolded in the 1860s. As so many young men lost their lives, not all families could afford to visit the faraway national cemeteries where their loved ones were buried. For people in this situation, memorial lithography could provide a form of solace denied by their physical distance from family members' remains.

Objects like the Sheldon's embroidery and print gave families an opportunity to withdraw their mourning process from the public sphere; to grieve rather than perform a socially proscribed choreography of grief. Amidst the rigid social codes of middle-

SEE MOURNING ON PAGE 3

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MOURNING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

class Victorian life, a paper gravestone could perhaps offer a more intimate — and certainly more private — site of remembrance than a real gravestone erected in a cemetery.

Contributed by: Taylor Rossini, Archives Assistant at the Henry Sheldon Museum and graduate of Middlebury College in art history.