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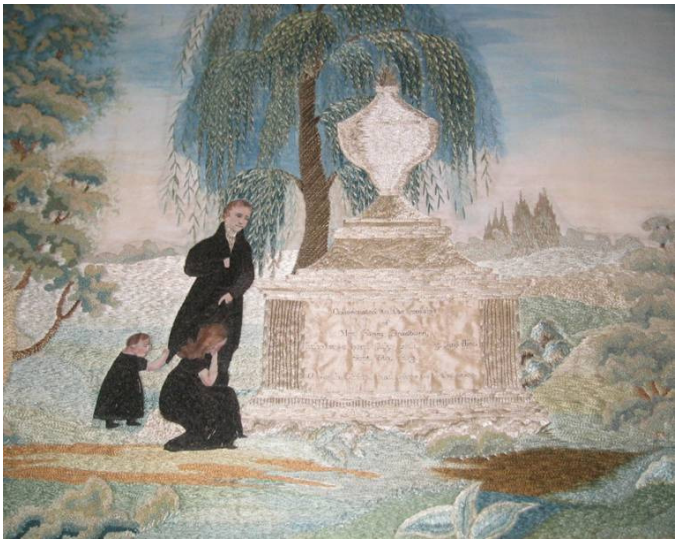
The Art of Mourning: Iconography in Mourning Jewelry and Needlework

by Sarah Coster

Symbols of mourning and remembrances of lost friends and loved ones were a common part of life in the 18th and 19th-centuries. To our modern eyes, these objects, be they rings, pendants or silk needlework images, seem to reflect a culture obsessed with death. If we closely examine the facts, however, we see a culture interested more in the intellectual world of symbolism and neoclassicism, than with the pure act of mourning.

A look at two samples, the c. 1820 mourning pendant that was possibly worn by Sarah Carlyle Herbert and an 1803 silk needlework image, are good examples of the typical mourning image from that time. Unlike today, originality in art was not highly valued. Most popular images were copied dozens of times and used over and over again. As a result of the copyist tradition, mourning pictures have a set iconography. The urn is the most important symbol. In ancient times it held both the ashes and the organs of the deceased. In mourning pictures, the urn generally is central in the composition and quite large in scale. In the Herbert pendant, the urn is topped with an obelisk, a symbol of ancient Egypt, a culture with its own unique burial and mourning practices.

Mourning Pendant with Hair, courtesy of the Wilton House Museum



1803 Silk Needlework, Dumbarton House Collection

Nearly every mourning picture includes a prominent willow tree, an ancient symbol of mourning. The willow also symbolizes the Resurrection, since it regenerates itself after being cut. Often found at burial sites because they drain the ground of water, the willow, because of its drooping form, is ultimately a symbol of sadness. The lambs on the pendant represent Christ as the sacrificial lamb. Looking closely at the needlework picture, one can make out a river. Rivers represented the voyage of the soul to Heaven.

Other symbols typically found in mourning pictures include churches, which symbolize faith and hope, as well as the oak tree, a symbol of transitory life, the pine tree, which stood for

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everlasting life, and the ship, which represented the departing soul. The viewers would easily recognize these symbols and the "detective" work involved in identifying them created interesting parlor conversation. As art historian Anita Schorsch writes, "Discovering the cryptic message . . . was part of the pleasure in being an educated man or woman of that day."

In addition to the urn and willow, a mourning picture almost always included a group of mourners. The mourners are usually generic and the deceased is never depicted. The male figures often look directly out at the viewer, while the female figures almost never do. This may be an indication that the male figure is emotionally stronger, and it is more the female role to mourn. Anita Schorsch argues that mourning, in the eighteenth century worldview, was seen as a typically feminine trait, because women symbolize the less than perfect part of God's creation. "And since grief is a human characteristic, it follows that the visible symbols of grief have been feminine also." Making the argument that Americans viewed mourning pictures as "Christian art," Schorsch illustrates how scriptural subjects were a way for Protestant America to have a religiously sanctioned yet elegant art form.

In her 1879 memoirs, Sarah Anna Emery reminisced that by 1812 "mourning pieces were in vogue though some preferred scriptural or classical subjects." Why were mourning pictures so popular? What influenced them?

The Influence of Neoclassicism

The excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the eighteenth century had a huge influence on the art and design of the period. In 1770, Sir William Hamilton, a British envoy to Naples, published four volumes illustrating his collection of vases and other antiquities, some of which came from Pompeii and Herculaneum. Two years later, the British Museum purchased the whole collection. The excavation and dissemination of ancient Roman artifacts had a major influence on the fashion of the time, known as "neoclassicism."

Mourning art borrowed heavily from the motifs of classical Greece and Rome, Grave steles recovered from Italy and Greece had a direct impact on the mourning figure. Urns, columns and bellflowers decorated the interiors of most Federal period homes, and drew their inspiration directly from the ancient Mediterranean world.

Artists like Benjamin West and Jacques-Luis David incorporated ancient Greek and Roman themes into their artwork. In 1768, Pennsylvania-born artist Benjamin West painted *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*. The painting depicts the widowed Agrippina returning to Rome with the ashes of her assassinated husband Germanicus. Agrippina's return put herself and her children in danger, and her courage and virtue were meant to inspire the viewers of West's painting.

Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus, Benjamin West, 1768

By extolling the virtues of the female mourners and creating sympathy for them, the artists helped shape an archetype that would later find expression in silk needlework pictures. Schoolgirls copied many of the elegant poses expressed in these paintings, particularly the woman in the foreground of *Agrippina*, into their needlework pictures.

Even female dress took on a classical character, with its empire waist, emphasized bust line, and white fabrics imitating the robes of Roman goddesses. Around 1800 women adapted classical

Angelica Kauffman, A Grecian maiden decorating the tomb of Shakespeare.

styles into their dress in a radical change in fashion. Anita Schorsch argues that the Swiss artist Angelica Kauffman helped to popularize neoclassical female attire. Kaufmann's paintings "made mourning avant-garde." Copies of her classical female figures appear throughout mourning art and other silk needlework images. Anita Schorsch credits her with creating "the archetypical mourning picture, first in the form of a Grecian maiden decorating the tomb of Shakespeare."

The Death of George Washington

While Kauffmann commemorates Shakespeare, a typical English and European theme, Americans had someone nearer and dearer to their hearts to commemorate. The death of George Washington in December of 1799 sparked the overwhelming popularity of mourning pictures in America. They reached their peak about 1815 and continued into the 1820s.

Washington was a true national hero. Even when he was alive, few Americans were without an image of him in their homes. After Washington's death, artists produced innumerable prints and images of his death or tomb. Mourning of a public figure is a long-standing tradition. When a public figures dies, public expressions of mourning are expected and promoted Therefore, a man as important to the country as Washington inspired a public outcry of mourning like none other. "To mourn (Washington) was in true Roman spirit, and act of patriotism, the love of one's country and its beloved founder being equaled with the love of God." In 1800, few American homes lacked a print, needlework picture, or some representation of George Washington's death.

Memorial images to George Washington decorated walls as well as jugs, fabric and much more. "Many of the memorials to Washington in 1799 reflected not only the sincere grief of a stricken nation, but the hand of commerce as well. In both Europe and America, craftsmen, artists, and merchants freely copied any design that would sell textiles, ceramics and prints." These goods and prints were widely circulated and the images became ideal sources for the design of silk needlework projects for boarding school girls. Numerous silk needlework pictures depict mourners at Washington's tomb, often with Mount Vernon in the background, or with an image of Washington on the tomb. Over time, schoolgirls began inserting a loved one's name on the tomb in place of Washington's.

Silk Needlework Picture in Memory of George Washington. Notice Mount Vernon in the background.

Perhaps it was a combination of grief and fashion that inspired Sarah Carlyle Herbert to have a pendant made with her husband's hair. Whatever the reason, it served as a sweet and beautiful reminder of their long marriage.

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