

Life Cut Short: Hamilton's Hair and the Art of Mourning Jewelry
At the New-York Historical Society to May 10, 2020

(New York) On view now is a special installation that looks at hair and other mourning jewelry through a display of some sixty bracelets, earrings, brooches, and other accessories drawn from New-York Historical Society's collection by Dr. Debra Schmidt Bach, curator of decorative arts. Because hair decomposes slowly, miniatures and other jewelry decorated with hair became symbolic of mourning. These personal mementos provided solace while also being fashionable and socially appropriate.

Highlights of the installation include a gold mourning ring containing a lock of founding father Alexander Hamilton's hair, clipped by his wife Elizabeth as a keepsake while he was on his deathbed (Fig. 1) and a Tiffany & Co. mourning bracelet featuring hair, gold, silver, and diamonds ca. 1854, one of many mourning items sold by the New York City jeweler (Fig.2).

Also featured in the display are miniaturist John Ramage's hair-working tools and ivory sample cards with selections of hair designs that point to the rising popularity of mourning jewelry in late eighteenth-century America. Active in New York from 1777 to 1794, Ramage created miniatures that incorporated "hair painting" or curled or woven locks of hair secured under glass within gold cases. Period advertisements, instruction and etiquette books, and illustrations of hair-braiding patterns provide context for the jewelry.



Fig. 1 Unidentified maker. *Mourning ring containing lock of Alexander Hamilton's hair presented to Nathaniel Pendleton by Elizabeth Hamilton, 1805.* Gold, hair. New-York Historical Society, Gift of Mr. B. Pendleton Rogers, 1961.5a



Fig. 2 Tiffany & Co. (1837-present), retailer. *Mourning bracelet, New York, ca. 1854.* Hair, gold, diamonds, silver, textile. New-York Historical Society, INV.774.

This mourning bracelet memorializes Mary Elizabeth Morris, who died in 1851 at the age of 43. The bracelet was probably made with her hair as a keepsake for one of her daughters.