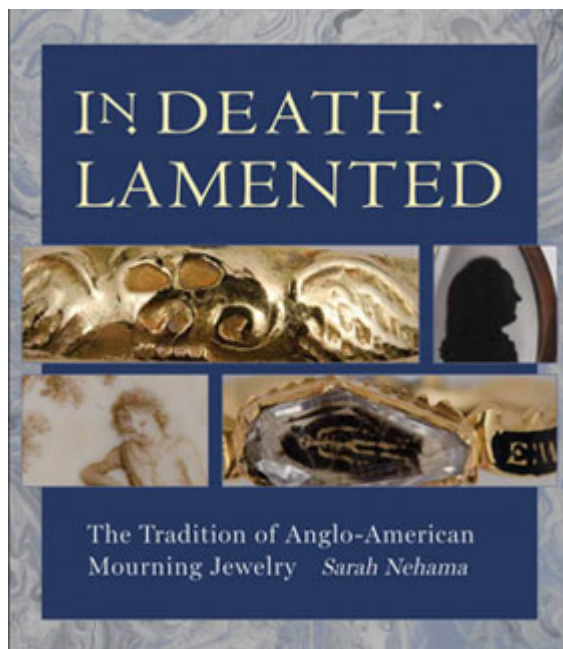


# Baubles of Death



Sarah Nehama's catalogue *In Death Lamented* was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name that she curated at the Massachusetts Historical Society. The topic is mourning jewelry—ornaments produced in honor of a deceased person—a genre that scholars have often overlooked for its macabre and maudlin associations. Nehama traces the changing forms and cultural uses of mourning jewelry in America from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. She draws her examples primarily from the holdings of the MHS, but supplements them with pieces from her own private collection.

Nehama brings the precise eye of a jeweler to the project. The strength of the catalogue lies in her exacting and detailed analyses of individual objects. These textual descriptions are well matched by the spectacular and copious photographs that allow readers to see Nehama's points clearly for themselves. From the twisting black enameled band of the rococo mourning ring, to the hair-infused ivory landscape of the neoclassical locket, to the paste and jet enhanced curls of the Gothic Revival brooch, mourning jewelry has never looked so good. Nehama's work as a jeweler may also have shaped her exploration of the changing materials used to create mourning jewelry and her detailed explanations of modes of manufacture. A fascinating sidebar in the catalogue, for example, shows the stages in the creation of a Georgian-style enameled mourning ring, as completed by contemporary jeweler Will Francis. Thanks to this step-by-step explanation, these seemingly simple gold bands—embellished with enameled decoration that included the name and age of the deceased—prove to be surprisingly complex. The catalogue gives the viewer a sense of these bands' three-dimensionality and their luxury, elements that are difficult to convey without direct contact. This emphasis upon craftsmanship was complemented in the exhibition by the display of a hair braiding tool: a stool

made into a loom upon which hair could be braided or twined. Such an apparatus makes clear exactly how intricate those patterns of hair commonly featured in nineteenth-century mourning jewelry, such as the lover's knot, actually were to produce.

Nehama organizes the catalogue chronologically. Each chapter begins with a brief historical essay and then breaks out to individual catalogue entries, a format that allows the author to fully elucidate stylistic trends in mourning jewelry. She is also attentive to developments in craft as a result of new manufacturing processes, as well as changing mourning traditions. Moving from the seventeenth century through the postbellum period, the author deftly draws connections between jewelry and the larger iconography of funerals, tombstones, and the etiquette of mourning. Mourning jewelry also clearly exhibits stylistic influences from other forms of jewelry and underwent significant alterations as new media penetrated the form. In particular, Nehama's arguments for the relationship between representation (portraiture and mourning scenes) and jewelry show the complex constellation of practices and influences that shaped mourning jewelry. Nehama explains how the portrait and mourning miniature's rise in popularity over the eighteenth century resulted in the growing size of mourning brooches and lockets, detailing that "In order to accommodate the size of these miniatures, jewelry settings—both the bezel and the band—had to change substantially" (44). Similarly, the rise of photography in the nineteenth century and the desire to incorporate the daguerreotype also shaped the appearance of mourning jewelry as "jewelry forms evolved to house photographs, making it possible for mourners to wear them" (74).



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Throughout the catalogue, Nehama shows how densely enmeshed mourning jewelry was in larger patterns of life. Not aberrant objects produced only for funerals or created for grieving widows, mourning rings, lockets, brooches, and a plethora of other forms were items of everyday life for elites and increasingly, by the nineteenth century, those in the middle classes. They exhibit the patina of age and the effects of being handled and worn. In fact, the catalogue so convincingly places these artifacts within the texture of everyday life that the designation of mourning jewelry becomes problematic. To what extent is the category of mourning jewelry a function of the current collecting market that does not ultimately help to explain period practice? How separate were these items from regular jewelry and tokens of sentiment? Locks of hair snipped from a child's head as tokens of affection might all too soon be added to a mourning brooch so that parents could remember a lost toddler. Similarly, daguerreotypes exchanged by young lovers or husbands and wives and made into a locket could take on a memorial function after an untimely death. Is mourning jewelry not defined by the intended function at the time of

manufacture, but rather by the use to which the owner put a piece of jewelry? Such slippages encourage us to wonder how separate these items were from “regular” jewelry. That mourning jewelry’s styles paralleled shifts in other kinds of jewelry only complicates its position as a distinct form.

Although the author’s painstaking genealogical research anchors individual artifacts in time and space, it would have made the catalogue stronger to have a firmer grounding in actual behaviors and the specific uses of mourning jewelry. Nehama seems to take for granted that these artifacts were always primarily intended to forge a personal and emotional connection between the wearer and the deceased. Certainly mourning jewelry fulfilled this memorial role, yet *how* exactly did it do so? Recent works on hair jewelry have started to explore hair’s physical qualities and the symbolic associations that allowed hair to play a special role in sparking sentiment. These kinds of more metaphorical associations are missing in Nehama’s analysis. Also overlooked are the potential multiple functions of mourning jewelry. As Nehama notes, but does not fully explore, these items indicated a wearer’s status (as suggested by the fact that desire expanded over time to include those of the middle classes). They could also be used as tools of nation building—for example, those many mourning pieces that were created upon the deaths of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The catalogue even traces the ways that mourning jewelry could function as a tool of international diplomacy, as in the ring for Tsar Alexander I and Empress Elizabeth of Russia that was presented to Louisa Catherine Adams, who had befriended the couple while her husband, John Quincy Adams, served as the U.S. Minister to Russia. What impact might these other uses have had upon the development of the form?

The catalogue also raises interesting questions about gender, demographics, and transatlantic connections. Nehama notes that by the nineteenth century, women were “regarded as the primary ‘observers’ of a family’s grief,” and the catalogue suggests, though it does not explicitly state, that women were the primary wearers and consumers of these objects (72). This gendered association is highlighted by the inclusion of a few pieces of jewelry specifically for men including a stickpin (tie pin) and cufflinks. Nehama mentions other forms of mourning jewelry that are “distinctly masculine,” such as “watch fobs, and watch chains,” yet these are the only examples she gives. Are these forms less common because men were less likely to wear mourning jewelry? Did mourning jewelry become associated with women because of women’s growing role in the nineteenth century as keepers of the home and the family? The number of mourning rings made to commemorate young children and unmarried adults is a similar theme that emerges, but that is also never fully elucidated. (Interestingly, these were composed of white rather than traditional black enamel in order to connote the deceased’s innocence.) Do these examples point to a larger trend? Were mourning rings more commonly made to memorialize children than other deceased people? If so, does this suggest that mourning jewelry was intended in part to help those left behind to grieve during particularly emotionally devastating deaths?

Finally, the geographic parameters of the catalogue suggest possible questions of cross-cultural influence and the relatively limited audience for mourning jewelry. The designation "Anglo-American" is a loose one, and the catalogue interweaves rings produced in England with those of American manufacture without always distinguishing whether these items were made in England and used in North America, or if they are solely English examples. More careful attention to geographic location might have illuminated transatlantic connections as well as potential divergences between mourning jewelry made in England versus America. Considering the specific audience for these pieces might also have shed light on their function. What was it about this jewelry that appealed to Anglo-American elites and not Native Americans or African Americans? Was it solely expense that kept these groups from purchasing mourning jewelry (suggesting its importance in status definition), or was it related to divergences in burial practice and mourning traditions?

*In Death Lamented* raises many questions that I hope other scholars of early America will pursue. With its careful descriptions and seductive photographs, this catalogue should be a call to arms for museum professionals to put more mourning jewelry out on display and for scholars to give these artifacts greater attention. There is good reason to think that this will happen. The catalogue participates in two growing trends: works of American history that study how past peoples viewed and treated death, funeral rituals, and interments, and studies in art history and the decorative arts that take seriously jewelry, and more specifically hair jewelry. As scholars continue to pull apart the connections between mourning jewelry and the complex cultural practices that shaped it, the seeming conundrum of beautifully embellished rings becoming repositories of painful sentiment is one that promises to yield great historical insights.