

## Hairweaving and the heart

Before internet, phones, postal service and photographs, how did people remember those far away or passed away? Human hair, transformed into keepsakes through an old craft called “hairweaving,” provided a memento for these and many other life milestones, such as weddings and births.

Before the wide availability of photography in the 1850s, gifting a lock of hair served as a simple yet profound expression of love. When travel forced people apart, such a token preserved bonds of the heart. And soon, ways to securely carry the locks proliferated.

Miniature portraits, with hair from the subject chopped up and dissolved in the paint used for the portrait was popular, as was hair that adorned the portrait’s reverse.

Royalty of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who could afford the luxury were the first to have hair woven into jewelry. As metalworking techniques improved and became more affordable, the Victorian middle class also acquired such jewelry. Designs quickly evolved to include more complexity in the hair work, personalized engraving and, eventually, photographs instead of painted portraits.

The Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, South Carolina, includes one of the most prestigious portrait miniature collections in the United States. Many of the miniature portraits include hair as a border, inlaid on the reverse, or incorporated in an image on the reverse. The durability of woven hair makes the details of these miniatures still available to view and appreciate today.



Photos courtesy of Gibbes Museum of Art

Fascinated from the first viewing, Gina Iacovelli, owner and hairwork artist at Charleston’s *Mementos Entwined* ([www.mementosentwined.com](http://www.mementosentwined.com)) researched hairweaving techniques in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century lady’s journals to learn the craft of hairweaving. Today she creates hair keepsakes for similar purposes with an updated style in basketweave, knotwork, and tablework chains incorporated in locket, rings, and more.



Her work and that of hair weaving artists from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries show that hair, delicate strands that stand strong when bound together, did and can still talk to the heart.