

ARTS & CULTURE



Photo by Brett Blocker

Kandiyohi County Historical Society Executive Director Jill Wohnoutka displays a recently donated work of “hair art” in the Sperry House, where it will be placed alongside similar Victorian-era items such as the yellow “hair receiver” on the nightstand. While this donation is the first of its kind for the county historical society, “hair art” is surprisingly common in other museums and historical societies across the globe, with a seemingly endless range of curly creations, like the near foot-tall floral hair bouquet in the Minnesota Historical Society’s collection, woven with the locks of roughly 20 individuals between 1860-1880. Below right: A porcelain hair receiver (circa 1850), also in the state historical society’s collection, which would be used to collect and store strands for later use.

Not your standard hairpiece: KCHS receives keratin keepsake

By Brett Blocker
Editor

It’s been just over three years since the Lakes Area Review debuted its first “Arts & Culture” section feature, and in that time, we’ve heard stories from just about every kind of artist out there: puppet-makers, playwrights, musicians, woodworkers, a collector of giant metal roosters... But hair art? That’s a first. Macabre? Maybe a bit. Unnerving? Eerie? Sure. But certainly interesting. And while the practice has largely fallen

out of favor, at one point, locally and abroad, generations of Victorian-era women saved their strands in special containers to be later woven into wreaths, stitched into bracelets and plaited upon brooches. So common was the practice that entire galleries have since been devoted to the medium: Leila’s Hair Museum (currently closed) in Independence, Missouri, for example, boasts over 400 wreaths and thousands of jewelry pieces crafted from the stuff; smaller exhibits can be found in public and private collections across the globe. However, despite its ubiquity, hair art has been strangely absent from the Kandiyohi County Historical Society.

Until recently... Thanks to one local donor, the museum now has its first ever “hair piece,” to be displayed in the era-appropriate Sperry House alongside numerous other artifacts of the 19th century. “In the bedroom we have a little container that was used to hold hair from brushes,” said Jill Wohnoutka, KCHS Executive Director, “so when we’ve given tours, we would show it to people, explaining that it would have been used to create hair art. But we never actually had an example.” The piece in ques-

tion: A wire-framed series of long brown locks swirled around a crucifix centerpiece and neatly preserved in a wooden shadow box frame. Karen Horsley, formerly of Murre Township and heir to the hair, donated the item earlier this summer, but notes in an email to the Review that details are scant. “[It] was moved around from closet to closet in our home as I was growing up,” she writes. And while her children found it to be “creepy,” “I always thought it was interesting, but I’ve been surprised that so many others have also found it interesting.”

Based on documents provided by the historical society, the piece would have been created by a daughter of the Holmgren family’s first generation ancestor August, a Sweden emigrant (Karen’s great-grandfather) who arrived in Murre Township in the spring of 1880.

August and his wife Maria would go on to farm 160 acres between Pennock and Kerkhoven, raising 11 children – seven sons and four daughters. Records indicate at least three of the children died before or within one year of the turn of the century, including oldest daughter Elizabeth, her sister Johannes and youngest sibling Emma, who died at 28 of pulmonary tuberculosis. Of the item, Karen said, “I do not recall ever seeing it displayed, but I remember coming across it from time to time when we might be digging out Christmas decorations or looking for something else in storage. And that’s when mom

would tell Emma’s sad story.” Neither Karen nor Wohnoutka know for sure who wove the work, or even whose hair is featured, but

Sondra Reierson, Senior Curator of 3D Objects at the Minnesota Historical Society, suspects the item was crafted by a family member as a memento after one of the young women’s deaths. And based on color consistency, all hair came from the same head.

Although the only one of its kind in KCHS’s collection, the Minnesota State Historical Society is well-acquainted with similar works of hair art, housing 30 pieces of its own, with 14 currently on display in the museum’s “Then Now” exhibit.

Watch chains, lockets, bracelets, necklaces – Reierson has seen it all. Usually, she said, hair art would be used as an adornment of jewelry, but the range is limitless: “One piece we have that’s particularly interesting is a little tree made of hair that has like 20 different people’s hair, with all their names.” So why hair? “Generally speaking, hair is pretty darn stable. The examples we have date to the 1860s and look brand new,” said Reierson.

In an age of high mortality rates paired with revolutionary advances in science and societal structure, the Victorian era (1837-1901) was notoriously sentimental – a theme expressed not only through poetry and painting, but in the rituals surrounding love and loss.

Photography would arise

during the later stages of this period – to be followed by a form of post-mortem portraiture called “death photography,” in which families posed with the recently deceased – but for the most part, unless families were able to afford commissioning an artist to paint their portraits, physical keepsakes were largely limited to letters, and naturally, hair.

“We’ve been saving hair as long as we’ve been burying our dead,” Reierson said, and hair art as we know it traces its roots to 16th century Europe, “but Victorians

as “mourning culture,” going so far as to don black attire for the remainder of her life, as well as jewelry adorned with the late prince’s hair. The trend soon spread across the world. By 1859, monthly how-to articles on preparing and working with hair appeared in “Godey’s Lady’s Book,” a Philadelphia-based women’s magazine, followed by the 1867 publication of American author Mark Campbell’s book “Self-Instruction in the Art of Hair Work, Dressing Hair, Making Curls, Switches, Braids and Hair Jewelry of Every Description.”

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“There was a whole industry,” a 276-page tome of illustrations and instructions encompassing, as the title suggests, hair art of every description.

“There was a whole industry.”

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