

Requiem

Memorializing loved ones with jewellery

By Lynn L. Strelau



This antique gold memorial brooch features a nine-karat gold circular form centring a window containing a lock of hair. The piece is surrounded by seed pearls and black enamel reading 'In memory of.' Another window compartment is on the reverse.

As jewellery designers, we have the great privilege of becoming a part of our clients' personal lives. Jewellery is all about celebration—engagements, weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, graduation, new babies, marking life's achievements and milestones, or simply celebrating 'just because.' Working with a client to create a special and personal piece is one of the most satisfying aspects of our career.

While jewellery is clearly a way to mark a happy occasion, it can also commemorate the loss of a loved one. In addition to the innate grief a person experiences, however, these sad occasions can also be times of celebration and remembrance. Being asked to help a client in this respect is an even greater privilege for a designer.

I have always felt I have done my job well when a client cries tears of joy upon picking up their new creation. Jewellery is such a personal thing—some people want to show off, while others see it is a deeply intimate expression of themselves, where they came from, or where their life will lead. When those tears are a combination of sadness over a loss and a celebration of life, they are even more poignant.

Photo courtesy Dupuis Fine Jewellery Auctioneers

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At left is a 19th-century memorial ring mounted in 14-karat gold. Its design features an urn composed of hair that is accented by seed pearls within a glazed compartment. To the right is a 10-karat gold snake motif memorial brooch centering a coiled lock of hair within a glazed frame and surrounded by a split-pearl ouroboros.

Conveying a sentiment

Memorial jewellery can be many things, but it is always deeply personal. As a jeweller, I find it truly a privilege to work with a client—to create these important pieces. The best jewellery always has a story to tell—discovering this story and how to translate it into a design involves a great deal of discussion, empathy, creativity, emotion, and often tears. Both the client and the designer are affected, as painful and joyful memories are brought to the fore.

Often, memorial jewellery is simply the re-design of jewellery belonging to a loved one. We have all made jewellery using stones or metal from a grandfather's watch fob or mother's treasured diamond wedding ring. The sentiment is all about knowing the provenance of the materials and being able to give them new life. At our studio, we have combined three or more generations in single pieces and they have their story to tell. I do admit to some queasiness, however, when a client comes in with great-uncle's gold teeth to use in a new ring!

Some memorial jewellery is subtle and its message is only known to the wearer. Other pieces are made to invite inquiry from the observer and be more obvious in nature.

Memorial jewellery has a long history—reliquaries, mourning jewellery, memento mori, and woven hair jewellery are all examples. While they may not be as common in contemporary times due, perhaps, to Western culture's aversion to the idea of death and dying, they can be traced back to the 4th century. Many religions celebrate saints by enclosing their relics in elaborate bejewelled reliquaries or instruments used in the sacraments. On a smaller scale, these relics were often set in wearable jewels for the faithful. The medieval and Renaissance periods saw personal jewellery called memento mori, which served both as a celebration of loved ones and reminders of the inevitability of death. They incorporated images of skulls, gravestones, and weeping willows. Some had capsules containing the hair of the loved one.

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All jewellery tells a story and this ring is no exception. For instance, the rugged edges of the gap between the two bands seen here symbolize the rupture of loss for this ring's owner.

“*Reliquary jewellery is another thing altogether, and I have had the honour of designing and creating several pieces over the years. In most cases, the client wants to have jewellery to hold ashes of their loved one.*”

During the Victorian era, jewellery made from hair became very popular. Books were published and classes available to instruct people in the intricacies of weaving hair into complex forms that could be used as bracelets, necklaces, and earrings. While many incorporated delicate gold work, other pieces were representational, depicting flowers, landscapes, or decorative motifs enclosed behind glass. These could incorporate hair from more than one person, a family tree of sorts.

Moving to the present

Celebrating a life that is gone can take many forms. Early in my career, a client came in after the death of his partner from a terminal illness. They had only been together five years, although they made the best of their time, spending it travelling. His request was to design a ring that symbolized their relationship. A lot of discussion ensued and the ring design evolved. First there was a white gold band that represented the continuum of life. Overlaid on this base were two yellow gold bands separated by a gap. One band contained five finite steps representing the five short years they had together. The second gold band was a sinuous, endless curve indicating the unknown and perhaps infinite future. The gap between the two bands had rugged rough edges to show the rupture of his loss. These two components of the owner's life were bridged and connected by a bezel-set purple sapphire, which he had purchased on a vacation to Asia. When it was completed, my client wore the ring with pride.

Another client came in after the too-early death of her only brother, whose nickname was Bud. She, too, wanted a ring in memory of him, so I designed one with a pair of hand-fabricated pink gold rose buds. A yellow gold stem joins the two flowers with green gold leaves and white gold thorns (to remind her of the pain of death). Again, this was a very personal statement; she could either explain its story if she wished or simply let others admire it without knowing the significance of the ring's design.

Reliquary jewellery is another thing altogether, and I have had the honour of designing and creating several over the years. In most cases, the client wants to have jewellery to hold ashes of their loved one. This can be as simple as a commercially produced locket or a fabricated custom-made receptacle.

My client, Mary, came to me after the loss of her son in a senseless car crash. He was only 20 and the devastation to her life was intense. We had many meetings during the course of making her reliquary pendant and there were tears of sadness and joy during most of them. She did not want a simple locket, but rather something that would



Hair-work jewellery was quite popular during the Victorian era. Here, the author re-interprets it for a client whose request was to encase her mother's hair in a ring after she passed.

be reflective of her son and his life. His best friend was his white German Shepherd, and so we modelled a profile of one and cast it in white gold, making a matching domed back piece to form a hollow form. Since the dog had touches of colour in his ruff and head, we added subtle overlays of yellow gold. My client said the dog loved to play and always had a ball or two in its mouth, so we set an emerald cabochon in the mouth, as her son was born in May. I set a diamond from his father's wedding band to serve as the dog's eye.

Figuring out how to securely enclose the small amount of cremains posed a bit of a problem. Obviously, we couldn't solder the piece closed with the ashes inside and this commission happened before we had a laser welder. The solution was to make a small pouch from a thin sheet of lead. Placing the cremains in the pouch, we folded over the edges and used soft solder to seal the package. This was then enclosed in the two halves of the white gold pendant. The front piece had several registration pins that fit into holes in the back plate, enabling us to rivet the two halves together. To achieve a watertight seal, we used silicone before the final closure.

Due to budget and personal preference, another client decided to simply purchase a commercial 14-karat gold heart-shaped locket to hold her husband's ashes. We used the same technique of placing the cremains in a lead pouch and sealing the locket with silicone. We engraved his dates of life and initials on the back.

Peering into a life

Another client (also named Mary) visited the shop after her father's death. She had great love for him and wished to celebrate this in a more prominent way. She requested a pendant with a crystal front that would leave the cremains visible. This, of course, presented construction issues above and beyond the sentimental and esthetic concerns. She knew she wanted to wear the pendant most of the time and we had to develop a way to ensure the ashes would remain secure while on permanent display.

To do that, we made a thick-walled round silver box built around a standard sapphire watch crystal. We attached a simple two-piece bail—this allowed for future repair, as the jump ring and bail will inevitably require rebuilding. In addition, one cannot heat the entire silver piece to repair a fixed bail, although the

bench tips



The crystal front on this pendant allows for the cremains to be visible, in this case, bone fragment. The piece is sealed with silicone to ensure it is watertight and secure.

advent of the laser welder makes this less of a concern. We had the back of the pendant engraved with her father's name and dates of his life. As this was a delicate and very emotional undertaking, we chose a fragment of cremated bone with Mary's assistance to put inside the piece. The bone was quite fragile (my previous assumption was that cremains were actually tiny pieces of ash, but in fact, there are larger fragments). We again used silicone to secure the bone to the back of the silver locket and applied more silicone to seal the top of the box to the base. We also sealed the crystal in its bezel with silicone.

Mary has worn the piece almost daily for more than 10 years and it remains watertight, although she does not shower or go swimming with it on. A small amount of bone has flaked off, but it has settled into the locket and the main piece remains intact. Mary tells me she receives many inquiries about her pendant and she is very proud to tell them the story of her father and their bond. She remains close to him by having him with her always.

Mary returned this year after her mother passed away, and made a similar request for a piece of jewellery to

celebrate her life. My first inclination was to simply open her father's reliquary and add some of her mother's ashes. Although her parents had had a long and happy marriage, Mary did not want to put them together in this way. Instead, she wanted a ring made that encased some of her mother's hair in it.

I have seen a lot of antique Victorian-era hair-work jewellery and was intrigued to find a way to interpret it today.

Mary showed me the lock of hair she had kept. (At 80, her mother still had naturally brown hair!) I knew we would need to make a capsule, similar to the piece made previously, but on a smaller scale. Mary has relatively large hands and knew she wanted to wear the ring on her index finger. As such, I was able to design a large ring without worrying it would be too big for her.

A ring is subject to more wear and tear than a pendant, so there were concerns about keeping the capsule sealed. I decided to make this part of the ring from 18-karat yellow gold to allow the use of the laser welder for the final seal. However, to stay within budget, I used silver for the rest of the ring. We started with a 12-mm sapphire watch crystal and built the gold box around it. After final polishing, we glued the crystal with aquarium-grade silicone.

Incorporating a synthetic heart-shape ruby birthstone that came from her mother's ring posed another design challenge. My first thought was to set it in a gold claw setting and place it in the centre of the gold capsule, circling it with a wreath of the mother's hair. However, the stone was more than 10 mm across and to enclose it made the ring far too high to be remotely practical for the frequent wear it would be receiving. Instead, we decided to set the ruby birthstone on one shoulder of the ring and, for balance, set a simulated emerald (Mary's birthstone) on the other.

Working with hair proved to be more of a challenge. Needless to say, I could not practice on her mother's hair, so I visited a hair salon and got a few locks to work with. I did some research on technique for hair-work,

bench tips



A client's wish for reliquary jewellery resulted in this pendant, which holds her son's remains. The German Shepherd symbolizes his bond with his dog. The emerald is the son's birthstone, while the diamond came from his father's wedding band.

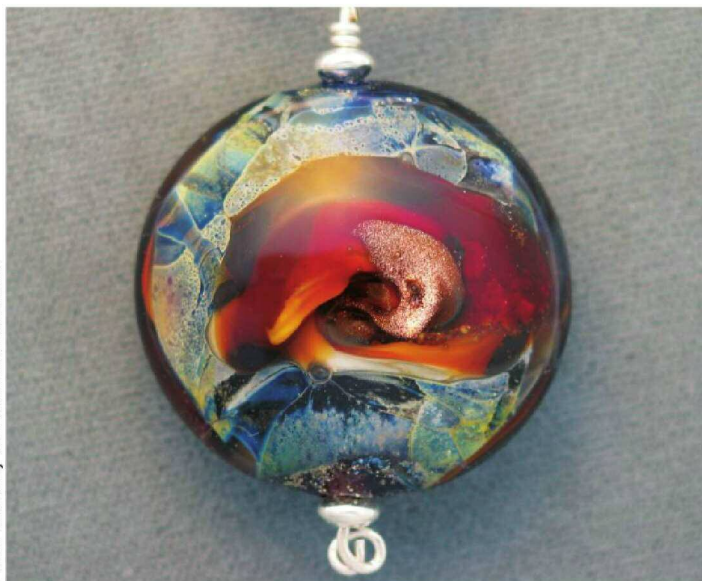


Photo courtesy www.susanstanford.com

Jewellery artist Susan Stanford uses a small amount of cremains in the molten glass of her lamp-worked beads.

but could not find much to help. Mary's mother's lock of hair was not of consistent length, so braiding would be very difficult. I finally used some clear moustache wax to give the hair enough structure so I could simply twist it into a rope that would lie in a spiral coil inside the gold capsule. A touch of silicone secured the ends and held it in place. For final assembly, I sealed the top of the capsule to the base with silicone. Next, I applied silicone to seal the entire capsule into the outer silver bezel, providing long-term stability. The gold capsule was recessed slightly in the heavy silver outer bezel for additional security.

Our hand engraver was able to engrave the mother's name and dates around the top of the silver bezel and the word 'Mom' on the side. This is not a ring many women could carry off, but Mary wears it with pride. She was thrilled to be able to have mom and dad close to her.

A different take

Another alternative for reliquary jewellery was developed by a dear friend from Sitka, Alaska. Susan Stanford works with glass and makes beautiful lamp-worked glass beads and tiny wearable bottles. It was the sudden death of her husband that prompted her to create beads with a small amount of the cremated ash mixed with the molten glass. The ash is only very subtly visible among the swirls of colour in her beads, adding a faint glitter.

Working with clients to create reliquary jewellery requires patience, understanding, and empathy. Some designers and craftsmen may find it difficult to handle such personal items and deal with the intense emotions involved. However, once you overcome the reluctance, the reward attained by sharing in our clients' lives is an experience that enriches our own as jewellery artists. ♦



Llyn L. Strelau is the owner of Jewels by Design, a designer-goldsmith studio in Calgary established in 1984. His firm specializes in custom jewellery design for a local and international clientele. Strelau has received numerous design awards, including the American Gem Trade Association's (AGTA's) Spectrum Awards and De Beers' Beyond Tradition—A Celebration of Canadian Craft. His work has also been published in Masters: Gemstones, Major Works by Leading Jewelers. Strelau can be reached via e-mail at designer@jewelsbydesign.com.