

“When this you see remember me”

Tokens of Remembrance & Love

by L.C.Lefko

How many of us have clipped our baby’s curls and tucked them in a baby book as a memento of their infancy? How many of us remember writing in the autograph album of a friend in our youth ? We save hand written letters and cards from people who have touched our lives and cherish the favorite handwritten recipe cards of our mothers. Mementos like these are becoming more precious as we pass through this digital world with email and instant messaging and recipe files online. Seemingly, the personal touch of the handwritten thought is becoming a thing of the past and has made these tokens of remembrance priceless.

It is easy to get absorbed in studying the various ephemera that are mementos of the past several generations. Their existence reflects the interests, past times and accepted beliefs of the 19th century romantic. Sentimentality was not necessarily the provenance of only women. Many of the tokens are small stitched, embroidered or painted pieces with handwritten dedications and testimonials to fondness and love. They were appreciated because of the affection with which they were created, not necessarily by their inherent value.

Keepsake albums were popular in the first part of the 19th century. They were leather bound, oftentimes with ornamented and embossed covers and marbled endpapers and filled with blank pages. Similar books were used for diaries, recipes and household records. The entries were often verbal remembrances, sometimes by the



album owner, and often from friends and family. Occasionally the handwritten verse was combined with watercolor and/or theorem painted embellishment. (FIG 1 Memento collection of author) The rose and scroll painting shown here exhibits the theorem (painting through successive layers of stencils) technique used to base in the roses and leaves as well as the hand watercolor embellishment used to define the leaf separation and veining, scroll and all the tiny buds and leaves. Flowers were often the subject of the painted ornamentation and it was believed that they had symbolic meaning. For example, the moss rosebud was symbolic of confession , the blue

violet we see so often in early floral paintings, symbolic of faithfulness, the pansy ~ tender thoughts.

Popular “language of flowers” books such as *Flora’s Dictionary* by Mrs. E.W. Wirt, 1829, were published and helped to convey the idea that the flowers were vested with symbolic meaning and the recipient could read it and get a particular meaning because of the various flowers used in the memento. Some of these books even had poems that would accompany the floral token, along with a poetic response for the receiver to send back. One of the major features of the 19 century New England newspaper was the poetry columns. The verses were often copied in to the keepsake albums of the period.



Sentimental customs of the 18th & 19th century include the preservation of a loved ones hair from a simple lock woven and tied in a friendship album to a formal piece made by a professional jeweler. During the 18th century hair was woven into brooches shaped like lyres and bows, necklaces, bracelets and rings, both as love tokens and memorial jewelry.

(FIG.2) Miniature 2' x 1 1/2" @ 1790, Watercolor on ivory with hair monogram on reverse, courtesy of Susan Dean, Antiques and Uncommon Treasure.

This exquisite water color on ivory of a dashing young man may have been given as a pledge of love and fidelity. The delicate hair monogram under glass on the back of this piece is beautifully executed by a professional hair artist. The hair monogram is not necessarily the hair of the young gentleman. Artists frequently had samples of hair ready for use in different pattern motifs upon completion of the portrait, so it was not necessarily the hair of the loved one. It was fashionable to wear portrait medallions as pendants on long chains or mounted as pins. These professionally water colored love tokens date to the end of the 1700's and in to the early 1800's.

By the 1830's hairwork had also evolved into an amateur pastime and can be found in family scrapbooks and friendship albums, the forerunner of the autograph book. Collecting hair from the living was a common practice. In fact, hair receivers often adorned the dressing tables in the boudoir. The miniature hairwork tokens of love and friendship were often adorned with fragments of ribbons or tiny watercolors ~ a friendship gift that would last forever and cost little. There is evidence these tokens were made in the early 1800's by young girls in boarding schools and often employed time-honored designs that were handed down through the generations.



Sometimes the hair tokens in the albums record an entire family's existence and the love between family and friends. Other times they are meant to be a presentation piece such as a valentine. (FIG 3 Token collection of author) Hair does not decompose so it is a lasting memento of the owner's existence.

Queen Victoria ascended to the throne in 1837 and was alleged to be responsible for making 'events' of holidays, birthdays, weddings and anniversaries- Hallmark's raison d'etre ! . Ladies often drew and hand painted their own valentines in the 1830's and 40's, and embellished commercial lace edged and embossed designs with verse. For those who were unimaginative or inarticulate, either the poetry column from the newspaper or the passionate verses printed in tiny booklets such as *The Ladies' and Gentlemen's New and Original Valentine Writer* by J.M.Fletcher, gave them plenty of sentimental material. These ornate verses found their way onto handmade tokens of all types ~ friendship albums, puzzle purses, rebuses (when the message contains pictures that represent words) and acrostics, (where certain letters in each line form a word or name).

(FIG 4 Watercolor theorem on paper, collection of author) The theorem painted valentine illustrated reads:

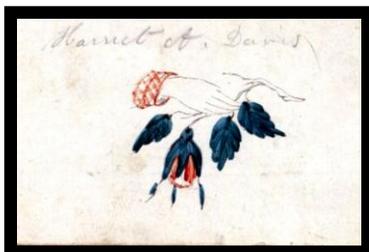


*Forget me not ~ I only ask,
this simple boon of thee;
And let it be an easy task,
Sometimes to think of me.*

The verse is typical of the type found in the pocket verse books of the day. The design of the theorem ~ roses and buds ~ are skillfully shaped to form an empty heart that encompasses the verse. The shading on the blossom, buds and leaves is primitive and almost non-existent. Several of these survive today in collections and are executed with various degrees of ability. This may indicate that the theorem pattern was available at a school setting and was probably designed by an artist/teacher then offered to the students for painting. It is obvious from the deterioration that the valentine was folded and tucked away for safe keeping over the years ~ a nameless treasure almost 200 years old !

All heart motifs were not necessarily related to love – some were given to school children as rewards of merit, some were used as fasteners for childhood locks of hair in Victorian memory books and still others were used in

fracturs as a design theme for birth registers, and wedding certificates.

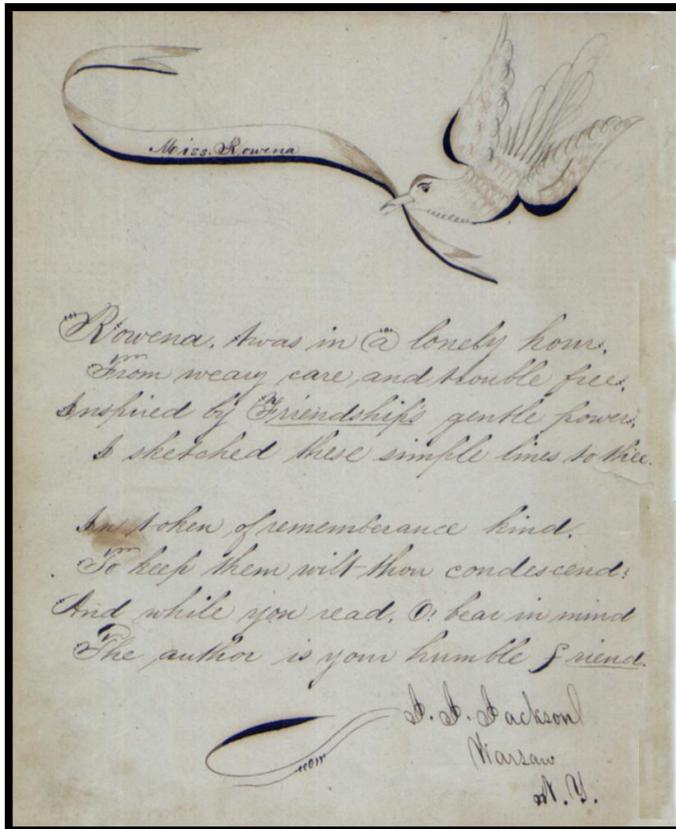


(FIG.5) Calling card of hand with rose, collection of author

(FIG.6) Hand-embossed chromolithograph Calling Card @ 1870, collection of author



The symbolic hand is often found on water colored love tokens and on calling or friendship cards that were popular during the last half of the nineteenth century. The invention of chromolithography in 1837 flooded the American market with tiny printed scraps that were used to create and decorate all manner of cards and love tokens as well as albums, workboxes and even furniture. This was a precursor to what we know as decoupage. These calling or friendship cards often had a hand and flower chromolithograph that covered a secret message or name. The lithograph was secured at one edge and could be easily lifted to reveal the message.



The handwriting that embellishes letters and friendship tokens covers a wide range of ability. Beautiful Spencerian penmanship exercises provided another method of personalizing messages of friendship and love. They were often combined with hair and tiny painted motifs and put into albums and diaries. Hours of dedicated practice would result in beautiful pages often embellished with penwork flourishes that defy the imagination. Instruction books were available and practice, practice, practice could result in a friendship album page like Rowena's. This does not diminish the handwritten messages of affection that are barely legible tokens.

FIG 7 Page from Friendship Album by Rowena, @ 1875, collection of author

18th & 19th Century women were the primary creators and keepers of mementoes and keepsakes, much the

same as they would be now if we weren't caught up in the fast paced whirl of the twenty-first century. They were the creators of the friendship quilts, family registers and sentimental gatherings that made a house a home. Domestic handiwork and creative leisure time is almost a thing of the past. It behooves us as artists to pass on this love for commemoration of special events, special friends and family through our handwork – our painting, our creative genius and our love of friendship. These friendship and love tokens can take many forms and document the dignity of expression of our generation. Hopefully our creative endeavors will be the mementos and love tokens for our future generations.

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