The late 19th century was a time of romance, sentiment and mystery. One tradition still holds a fascination for many of us: Victorian mourning and the items that served as reminders of their mourning such as jewelry, clothing and various other mementos, including portraits and photographs.

The Death. Death was a major part of Victorian life. A “good” death allowed the dying person to give advice and blessing to each family member, say farewell and quietly “fade away.” Death itself was not feared and was considered a release from the cares of life. The fear was that the death would not be mourned. Victorian mourning traditions were very elaborate and called for a separate subgroup of rules of etiquette.

The Funeral. Entire families mourned the deceased and funerals were held at home instead of church. After a death the house was darkened and crepe was draped on the front door as well as the first floor mirrors and windows. Clocks were stopped at the hour of the death. Candles were lit and flowers were brought in—not only for remembrance but to mask the odor of the decaying body. Funerale biscuits wrapped in white paper and sealed with black wax were served as favors for the guests.

Visits of condolence were expected to be made within a week for those who were unable to attend the wake or the funeral of the departed. There are sources that indicate that a widow or under-age children of the deceased were not necessarily expected to attend the funeral because their grief would be assumed to be too great to bear.

The deceased was laid out in the parlor or a downstairs bedroom and a 24-hour vigil would be kept until the burial one to four days later. Held out of respect for the dead, the vigil also had practical considerations—the fear of being buried alive. Such a concern was prominent and between 1843 and 1910 at least ten patents appeared for life detecting devices. One device was made up of a bell with a cord connected to the body; another used an electrical alarm and an air tube extending from the coffin to ground level.
An alternative to such special devices was to place a gun, knife or poison into the coffin so the living "corpse" could end the ordeal.

The nature of the invention shown at left consisted of placing on the lid of the coffin, and directly over the face of the body, a square tube, which extended from the coffin up through and over the surface of the grave. The tube contained a ladder and a cord. One end of the cord was placed in the hand of the person in the coffin, and the other end was attached to a bell on the top of the square tube. So that should a person be interred ere life is extinct, he can, on recovery to consciousness, ascend from the grave and the coffin by the ladder; or, if not able to ascend by said ladder, ring the bell, thereby giving an alarm and thus save himself from premature burial and death; and if on inspection, life is extinct, the tube is withdrawn, the sliding door closed, and the tube used for a similar purpose.

The Cemetery. By the early 19th century, colonial burying grounds and churchyards located in rapidly expanding towns and cities were becoming overcrowded and neglected. As the century progressed, there was a growing public attitude that a cemetery should fill a larger purpose than merely serve as a place for interment. The answer to these issues was the development of what we know today as the American "rural" cemetery.

In 1831, Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, became the first cemetery developed in the "rural" style. Mount Auburn was located away from the town's center and designed in a park-like manner. The cemetery's innovative landscape was complete with the winding paths and shady glens thought appropriate then for contemplating the solemnity of death. A rural cemetery was seen as a vast temple to the transcendent being where the visitor senses the eminence of God in nature. Any cemetery could meet the needs of the deceased—a rural cemetery was intended to satisfy the living.

A Victorian-era writer once rhapsodized about Cedar Hill's landscape: "The mind is impressed by the grandeur of the scene. The emotions are quieted by the vast calm of nature. One appreciates then the desire of so many cultivated persons to rest last in the midst of the perpetual beauties of earth. The soul is comforted with the thought that friends and kindred have at last found a place of sepulture in harmony with their characters and tastes worthy to contain and fitted to protect their memorials."

Mourning. The length of mourning depended on the individual and the person being mourned. A widow was not expected to leave the house for the first month, except to attend church. After the first month she could have callers and could go out, but not on frivolous trips. After three months, a widow could attend limited social events but she was still expected to appear in full mourning. After deep mourning, the widow could begin to re-enter society by attending church gatherings and visiting. After completing her mourning she could return to normal activities and could receive gentlemen callers. Widows were permitted more freedom than unmarried women. Because of this, some women preferred to remain unmarried after their mourning period was over. Widows did not have to answer to a man and were allowed to manage their own affairs. One source says that it was not expected that widows remarried because this indicated that they had slept with more than one man. However, it was not always practical for a woman to remain unmarried, especially if she had children and no way to provide for her family.

The traditional time of deep mourning for a widow was one year and one day. During this time she was expected to dress completely in dull black (signifying the loss of luster in her life) with no trim or jewelry except jet. After the first year, she would gradually lessen the mourning attire for an
additional eighteen months, which was divided into three stages. Second mourning lasted for about nine months during which the widow was permitted wear crepe as a trim rather than a “weeping veil” and to wear a white collar and cuffs. Her bonnet could be lined with white and the shortened veil was made of black net. The next stage, or ordinary mourning, lasted three months during which shiny silks and velvets were allowed. Stationery and calling cards also were adapted for mourning. The cards and paper were plain white printed with black borders. The width of the black border indicated the depth of the mourning. Calling cards also were made in pale gray and lavender for the later stages of mourning. For those in mourning, there were many ways besides their clothing to demonstrate their loss and their desire to remember the one who had died.

Mourning jewelry was generally made of materials such as jet, gutta-percha, gold, pinchbeck, and human hair. Mourning jewelry became fashionable in the 1800’s. The passing of Queen Victoria’s beloved Albert in 1861 began a forty-year period of mourning for Queen Victoria and an increased popularity of mourning jewelry throughout Great Britain. While some observed a period of mourning that had an end, many continued to wear mourning jewelry the rest of their lives as a demonstration of the depth of their grief and the lasting profundity of their loss.

Hair was incorporated into jewelry in the early 1800’s. This form of jewelry was often given as a token of love, but was also worn as mourning jewelry. Victorian hair jewelry ranged from lockets which held a lock of a loved one’s hair to jewelry delicately woven and braided into remarkably beautiful works of art.

The wearing of black mourning jewelry became popular in the United States during the Civil War. People commemorated the deaths of their loved ones by wearing black jewelry. With so many loved ones off to war, it was not uncommon for a departing soldier to leave a lock of hair with a loved one to keep near in his absence. This lock of hair was usually worn in a gold or silver locket and oftentimes transferred to a black locket upon the soldier’s death.

Hair art developed into many forms. Simply put, it was hair cut from a loved one, or gleaned from their hair brush, formed into jewelry or a framed piece. Elaborate braiding and knots were employed, and there were also hair braiding devices created to aid in working the hair efficiently. In fact, the jewelry industry developed special fittings and attachments to be used with hair, enabling the creative and skilled to use hair to make watch chains, rings, brooches, necklaces, and bracelets of various descriptions. Hair objects made from the hair of a departed loved one were popular mourning items.

In addition to jewelry, other items were kept as remembrances of the departed. These included posthumous portraits, daguerreotypes and other items having sentimental value to the family, including artwork and needlework.

The Development of 19th Century Mourning Images. The interpretation of plants and nature as the embodiment of the deceased arises often in literature and art. Many varieties of “weeping” trees are planted in cemeteries to convey the image of sorrow and mourning. At Cedar Hill these include weeping willow, European beech, higan cherry and Alaska cypress. A popular mourning image, the willow was valued as a funerary symbol for its mournful, drooping appearance and because it was easily regenerated from cuttings, it suggested immortality. In keeping with this concept, the 19th century “rural” cemetery landscape, with its winding roads and picturesque design combined the Victorians’ romantic concept of nature with that of death. The rural landscape imparted a religious atmosphere suitable for meditating on the transience of life and, in turn, influenced a school of landscape painting that placed tokens of mortality within pastoral scenes.

Also popular during this era was a form of painted mourning portraiture that depicted the deceased subject (usually a child) as alive. The only
indication that the subject was dead was the presence of special symbols, recognizable to the nineteenth century viewer. A rose held downward or by a broken stem indicated a life cut short, as did the presence of morning glories—flowers that bloom, wilt, and drop from the vine in less than a day.

A boat on calm water symbolized an easy death, on stormy water, a difficult one. A watch indicating the time of death might be prominently featured. Some parents, after the death of a child, had portraits painted of the child or children playing with favorite playthings. More obvious indicators, like tombstones or weeping willows, also were sometimes employed.

Advances in photography resulted the cultivation of new mourning devices or instruments.

The daguerreotype, once the sole province of the wealthy, made portraiture a medium available to all social levels. While we may think in terms of a photograph of a dead loved one being an appropriate memento, not everyone in that age either could afford or availed themselves of the opportunity to have a daguerreotype made of a loved one while they lived. That gave rise to a new branch of the photographic industry: post-mortem daguerreotypes. From the evidence left to us, it would seem that post-mortem daguerreotypes were more often of children than adults, most likely because no previous picture of the child had been made.

Postmortem daguerreotypes then became a part of the mourning and memorialization process, a tangible representation of the one lost to the family. Just as with the other mourning objects, it was another way to keep alive the memory of the departed.

In post-mortem daguerreotypes, the dead often were posed as if they were only sleeping. In the case of very small infants, it sometimes meant the dead child being held in the arms of the mother. Since the facial expressions of that time were almost always grim so as to make sure that the daguerreotype would be clear, a child cradled in the arms of a parent cannot be assumed dead and the daguerreotype to be post-mortem. At times, it is now difficult and even impossible to tell if a small child in a daguerreotype was dead or only sleeping if we do not know the story behind the daguerreotype. There are many daguerreotypes of small children in coffins, though, which relieves us of having to guess whether the child is asleep or dead.

The major difference between photographing the dead and painting a portrait was the characterization of the deceased subject after death rather than before. Some of the photographs differ from their painted predecessors by depicting their subjects as sleeping. This style of posthumous mourning portraiture emerged out of the desire to "deny death" and to imply that the deceased was not dead but merely "asleep."

Superstition:

Many superstitions abounded during the 19th century concerning death, some of which continued well into the 20th century. These included: covering mirrors in the house of the deceased, usually with black crepe, so that the next person to see himself in the mirror would not be the next to die; taking the corpse from the house feet first in the belief that if the head of the deceased faced backward he might influence another member of the family to follow him in death; stopping clocks in the house of the deceased to prevent bad luck for the
living, and closing the eyes of the deceased so that he may not choose someone to accompany him to the grave.

**Spirit Photography and the Spiritualism Movement**

Spirit photography began with one man, a Boston engraver named William H. Mumler, who discovered ghostly images of individuals on a photograph he had taken of a colleague in 1862. Mumler, who had been casually experimenting with his camera at the time, claimed to have had little or no interest in spiritualism. The news of Mumler's discovery quickly spread around the world and shortly after Mumler started a business as a medium/photographer, claiming he could call up deceased celebrities, strangers and family and friends of well-paying clients. He charged ten dollars per photograph at a time when an average portrait cost merely pennies. Mumler's portrait sittings were like any other, a person would sit for their own picture expecting their deceased friend or relative, a spirit "extra," to appear not in the studio but in the negative and prints.

Some people responded skeptically to Mumler's photographs, professional photographers in particular, as indicated by this editorial in the American Journal of Photography, "How wonderful is the recent progress of our art! We now in the usual way go through the process of having our picture taken, but when the finished photograph is presented, lo! Beside our lovely image is the attendant spirit, a babe, or a grandfather, or an unknown!... spirit photographs show, that the spirits dress in cloths of earthly fashion, that they sit in chairs, and that in sitting for their pictures they put on the smirks which some have supposed peculiar to mortals.

A focused investigation fueled by this cynicism exposed Mumler as a fraud two years later when his "spirits" were recognized as living Bostonians. Even though he was denounced in Boston as a fraud he believed that, "the innumerable hosts of living, intelligent beings who had passed to a higher life were with me, to sustain and assist in fighting the ignorance, bigotry and blindness of the human race in this their earthly condition." Unable to work in Boston again, Mumler moved to New York to reestablish his spirit photography business but there he was quickly arrested and charged with public fraud, larceny, and obtaining money under false pretenses.

Mumler defended himself by stressing that he used ordinary methods to obtain the photographs and that many individuals had examined his methods. His central argument was that many of his customers had recognized their dear departed loved ones in his pictures. The prosecution responded that the spirit forms were so vague that Mumler's customers saw what they believed or wished they would see. Neither side was able to prove its case strongly. Mumler's defense was solely reliant on proving the existence of spirits and ultimately the case was dismissed for lack of evidence in 1869. Although Mumler was not found guilty when he returned to Boston, he was unable to successfully work again.

Many modern researchers believe that Mumler may have actually captured something genuine in some of his photos, however, the lure of money was just too big a temptation for him and he supplemented his authentic photos with fraudulent ones in order to pay the rent.

Soon, other photographers, both amateur and professional, began to come forward and they also called themselves "mediums", claiming the ability to make dead appear in photographs. Spirit photography soon became a popular pastime and literally thousands of dollars were made from those who came to have their portraits taken. One photographer, William H. Ope, claimed to take more than 2,500 spirit photographs during a period of about two decades. Few of these photos appear to be in the least bit authentic.

Typically in the photographs, ghostly faces appear, floating above and behind the living subjects. In others, fully formed spirits would appear, usually
The fraudulent photographers became adept at doctoring their work, superimposing images on plates with living sitters and adding ghostly apparitions and double exposures. The appearance of the fully formed apparition was even easier. Old types of cameras usually demanded that the subject of the photo remain absolutely still for periods of up to one minute, all the while, the shutter of the camera remains open. During this time, it was very simple for the photographer's assistant to quietly appear behind the sitter, dressed in appropriate 'spirit attire'. The assistant remained in place for a few moments and then ducked back out of the photo again. On the finished plate, it would seem that a transparent "figure" had made an appearance.

This type of "trick photo" was first mentioned in photography journals in 1856. Ten years later, Sir David Brewster recalled the technique when he saw some of the early spirit photos that were produced. He remembered another photo that he had seen of a young boy who had been sitting on a step near a doorway and who had apparently gotten up and left about halfway through the exposure. As a result, the seated image was transparent in the finished photo. Brewster wrote: "The value and application of this fact did not at first present itself to me, but after I had contrived the lenticular stereoscope I saw that such transparent pictures might be used for the various purposes of entertainment." Ghost and spirit photographs and stereographs were sold commercially in America through the 1860's and 1870's but were nothing more than a parlor novelty and were no meant to be taken as genuine spirit photographs.

Some maintain that while the general population was fascinated with spirit photography, they were not shocked by it. Some saw spirit photography as validation of their belief in Spiritualism, a movement that had started just before the mid-nineteenth century and was quickly gaining popularity. The Spiritualism religion or movement endorsed the theory that the human spirit lived on and that one could communicate with the dead through channeling and mediumship.

A number of notable people believed implicitly in spiritualism and held seances to reach the "other side." Among them were Mary Todd Lincoln, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Harry Houdini and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Among the many women who worked in the spirit movement were Isabella Beecher Hooker, the half-sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe (Section 4, Lot 20). A life-long proponent of equal rights for women, Isabella came to believe that she could talk to her dead relatives and became convinced that the spirits would give her a divine mission to lead a matriarchal revolution.

**The End of an Era**

The morning cult of the Victorian and Edwardian periods came to an end with World War I as women entered the workforce and were no longer considered fragile and delicate. A generation of men were dying in battle and mourning clothes were inappropriate where men needed cheering. When the war ended, it was time for celebration, to throw away mourning weeds and open the door to the "Roaring Twenties."

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