

The Secret of the Edwardian brooch – December 2014

Audio transcript

0.08. This looks like a fairly ordinary brooch. It's got a photograph of a lady on it and we can tell from how she's dressed that it's probably an Edwardian brooch, which means it's from somewhere between 1900 and 1910. It looks like it's made out of gold, or a metal that looks a bit like gold, and it's got a design around the outside that looks like chain. It's not actually chain, because it's how they've made it. We might think this symbolises things such as constancy, eternity, unbreakableness – if “unbreakableness” is, in fact, a word. You can see where they've trimmed round the photograph so that they can actually fit it in the mount. It's quite a nice 'little' brooch. It's quite big, it's quite heavy.

00.57. But this brooch holds a secret. Shall we find out what it is?

1.02. If I unpin it, the central mount turns, and when we turn it around, we find that on the other side of the lady's photograph, there is a little pattern made of hair.

1.17. It looks like a fleur de lys, or perhaps the three plumes of the Prince of Wales – I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. If it is a fleur de lys, it might symbolise, for example, lilies. There's something slightly funereal about lilies, because amongst the many things they symbolise, they also symbolise remembrance. And so we may well be looking at a pattern of hair made from the hair of the lady on the other side of the brooch.

1.46. Or not.

1.48. I bought this from a vintage shop in Glasgow, and the lady in the shop said to me that it could well be the hair of a prostitute. Now, at this time, obviously, a lot of jewellery was made out of hair, and it wasn't necessarily a mourning thing: loved ones gave locks of their hair to each other – we see it in Victorian novels all the time and it becomes a bit of a cliché sometimes. But if you were to have, for instance, a hair bracelet – and you sometimes see these, they are plaited things; you'd have to provide a lot of hair. And if you were still alive, you probably wouldn't want to give up that amount of hair – at least, not without a struggle, or, well, financial recompense. And so ladies – certain ladies – would sell their hair to jewellers to be made up into these brooches [and other types of jewellery].

2.39. So what's quite possible is that, when the family of this lady decided they wanted to have their brooch made up, they may have gone to the jewellers and asked to have a swivel brooch made (this is what they're called, swivel brooches), and they [the jeweller] presented them with a tray of pre-made settings with lots of different patterns.

3.02. I've been researching this by looking through the British Newspaper Archive to see when people mention “swivel brooches”, and it's quite interesting. They often appear in the

lost-and-found columns in newspapers and it's fairly obvious why – if you had this as a keepsake or as a mourning brooch, and you lost it, you'd obviously be quite upset, and so you'd see if you could try and find it. You see them described as "A swivel brooch with hair on one side and a portrait of a gentleman of the other"; sometimes you will see "I've lost my swivel brooch; it's got a portrait on either side." So it wasn't always necessarily so that you would have hair on one side of it.

3.44. The other thing that's quite interesting is that I found an advert for a jeweller's in Birmingham, in the Jewellery Quarter, who was actually trying to recruit a jeweller who could make swivel brooches. Which is quite interesting, because I think it tells us that to actually do this is actually quite intricate, it's actually a skill that somebody would have. And it's also a skill that they wanted – these are quite popular things, it would appear.

4.08. So, the next time you go to an antiques market or perhaps a vintage shop, and you're looking at the different jewellery, and you see what might look at first like a clunky bit of jewellery with someone's photo on it, have a look – because you never know what secrets it might hold.