

ANTIQUES & COLLECTIBLES

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This paper watercolor-and-ink mourning picture commemorates Benjamin Witt (1750–1818), Revolutionary War veteran, father of nine, and lifelong resident of central Massachusetts.

The Promise of Always

Mourning pictures turned grief into art and remembrance. | BY CATHERINE RIEDEL

I recently attended the wake of a colleague's husband. It was made bittersweet by the fact that his wife and family had carefully displayed old photos and scrapbooks, their wedding album, and small mementos gathered over the course of his lifetime. This makeshift memorial illustrated that even in death, this man would not be far from his family's thoughts. It echoed the unspoken promise that exists between one who has passed and those who are left behind: "Will you remember me?" "Always."

There's no finer example of this promise than a mourning picture. Dating from the late 1760s until the mid-1800s, these images were hand-wrought memorials commemorating a person's death. They were the tedious and exemplary work of schoolgirls, completed both as an academic exercise and as a reinforcement of the religious, literary, and historical teachings of the day. A form of American folk art, mourning pictures evolved from the European tradition of honoring military heroes through commemorative art.

"Most often, they paid tribute to the life of a family member or close friend, but also common were ones honoring the lives of famous public figures," notes LaGina Austin, Americana special-

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ist at Skinner. "Among these were the many examples in homage to George Washington upon his death in 1799."

Mourning pictures took many forms, including watercolor on paper, silk, or ivory, and needlework of silk, cotton, or wool threads on a linen ground. Miniature examples, both painted and needlework, were fashioned as lockets or brooches. They often held a lock of the deceased's hair.

Scenes depicted one or more mourners, among them often a young woman, bent over a grave amidst an idyllic pastoral setting reminiscent of Eden. Other elements included urns, symbolizing the earthly body and spirit; elm and oak trees, connoting dignity and strength; thistle, representing sorrow; and ferns, symbolizing humility. Willow trees, representing resurrection and rebirth, were particularly popular elements, as their mournful yet graceful shape mirrored the grieving figure at the gravesite.

Today, it's easy to view mourning pictures as overly sentimental, even morbid. But in their day, these images were considered sincere and appropriate expressions of grief. Furthermore, they were fine examples of a young woman's academic achievement and were hung in the most important room of the home, on view for visitors and family alike.

Simple mourning pictures may be found for a few hundred dollars. In good condition, with little fading or loss, fine examples may fetch up to several thousand dollars. At a recent Skinner Americana auction, a watercolor mourning picture honoring the life of Benjamin Witt of New Braintree, Massachusetts, who died on April 17, 1818, at the age of 68, sold for more than \$20,000. I'd call that a fine tribute to both memory and achievement. ●

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