

Love tokens

Ever since people have been separated from family members or lovers, a physical reminder of the departed person has made the separation more bearable.

Enforced separation led to the widespread use of this practise. Sailors tattooing images and words onto their bodies and using bone, horn and ivory, collected while at sea, to create highly decorative objects and keepsakes inscribed with messages and designs for their relations back home.

By the fifteenth century coins were being exchanged between lovers. Many of these coins were modified by folding them in half with a hole pierced through them. These were worn around the neck or wrist in the belief they would ward off evil spirits and protect the wearer from harm.

By the eighteenth century painted portraits of family members or lovers were worn by the rich as pendants and locketts. The rise of literacy created an increase in letter writing in the nineteenth century. These letters were kept and treasured as a physical reminder of the writer by the recipient. Today, personalised love tokens still exist in a physical form.

How many of us have celebrated a new relationship by carving initials into a school desk at school or a tree trunk at a secluded beauty spot? The advent of desktops, laptops and email has seen a recent decline in letter writing but the increasingly widespread use of photography in the twentieth century meant many separations were made more bearable by the traveller taking a picture with them.

In 1914 the archaeologist Sir Flinders Petrie commented that it was still common for people to hold great faith in the power of inanimate objects as lucky or protective charms.

Between 1815 – 1845 the popularity of coins as love tokens reached a peak. Judges sentencing prisoners in England increasingly chose the option of Transportation to Australia as an alternative to the death penalty and many thousands of criminals were forced to leave their families and lives behind them.

Prisoners began to record their thoughts, fears and expectations by engraving coins before they left.

Historically, coins have been converted to commemorate births, deaths and love and to comment on social conditions and politics. Seventeenth century examples were created by skilled craftsmen and feature complex designs and lettering.

The easy availability, the soft metal and the lack of specialist tools needed to convert coins have meant they remained popular and quickly produced love tokens.

In prisons, often one individual was responsible for grinding away the original design replacing it with a picture and a message from other illiterate prisoners. Most examples offer a variant of ‘when this you see, remember me’ a phrase popular on glassware and lusterware at the time. Although 825 fully laden ships sailed over eighty years these love tokens are very rare and the few surviving examples vary in

quality. Some have only initials; some are comical but most are heartfelt messages of love. They offer a heartbreaking insight into the enforced separation of a family unit. With an average lifespan of forty years, transportation for a minimum of seven years and the social stigma of returning from Australia after transportation, many knew they would never return.

The majority of the surviving coins that can be traced back to individuals were sent by men. A small proportion were sent by women (even though the number of female prisoners in the country suggests that number should be higher).

Women did give tokens of love and remembrance, traditionally a lock of hair, kept in cloth pouches by the poor whereas richer people would incorporate the hair into pieces of jewellery and worn. These are called 'sentimental jewellery' and are another example of love tokens.