

Art

# Hamnet-era mourning jewel from celebrated painting rediscovered after 400 years

Exclusive: pendant appears in 1635 painting Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of His Wife that hangs in the Manchester Art Gallery

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Detail of jewellery and fabric from John Souch's 1635 portrait of Sir Thomas Aston. Photograph: Treasure House Fair/Royal Hospital Chelsea/Manchester Art Gallery - Bridgeman Images

A Hamnet-era mourning jewel has been rediscovered four centuries after it was immortalised in one of Britain's most enigmatic and celebrated 17th-century family portraits.

The heart-shaped pendant was depicted in *Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of His Wife*, the 1635 life-size, mourning masterpiece that was painted predominantly in black and white by the Cheshire artist John Souch. It hangs in the Manchester Art Gallery.



Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife by John Souch, 1635. Photograph: Bridgeman Images

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Aston's beloved wife, Magdalen, had died in childbirth months earlier and is depicted after death, lying beside the wicker cradle of their dead baby. Her bereaved husband, dressed in black, stands with their sole surviving child, three-year-old Thomas, who points to an inscription: "Grief is immeasurable."

They experienced more than their fair share of tragedy. Young Thomas was to die a year later, and their other children, Robert, Elizabeth and Jane, also perished as youngsters.

In the painting, Aston is wearing the pendant that had been made to commemorate the loss of Robert in 1634, aged just six. Its tassel was created from the child's blond hair.

No one imagined that this long-lost memento mori jewel had actually survived.

Souch was an English portrait painter who was particularly admired for his rendering of details such as drapery and jewellery.

Despite his precision in painting the pendant, it is only through the discovery of the actual object that its full meaning, details and inscriptions can now be understood.

Within a golden wreath, it is enamelled in black and white with a death's head skull and inscriptions in Latin on both sides, translated as: "Your Robert died 4 May 1634 ... In whom was our delight, through whom was our consolation, with whom the hope of his parents first perished." The inscription cannot be read from the painting.

The pendant had remained with the Aston family until its sale in 1862. The present owners acquired it 30 years ago, long after its poignant history had been forgotten.

On a chance visit to an exhibition that featured Souch's painting, they spotted their depicted jewel and realised its significance.

They contacted [Martyn Downer](#), an historian and specialist dealer in historical objects and works of art.

He told the Guardian: "It's in wonderful condition, [having] spent most of the last 400 years unrecognised. The iconic painting has been studied by scholars over the years, because it's full of symbols and metaphors ... Recovering the jewel unlocks some of the questions about the painting."

Recalling that Shakespeare had, in 1586, lost his young son, Hamnet - a tragedy that inspired the recent Oscar-winning film - he said of the pendant: "At its heart is a man mourning the loss of his first son. We're all familiar now with the story of Hamnet. This is a few years later and it's very touching ... Although it's quite a small object, it packs a lot of emotion into it."

The pendant has been valued at £650,000, reflecting its exceptional rarity. Jewellery from the 17th century is extremely scarce.

Downer, a former head of jewellery at Sotheby's London, said: "There's a great deal of interest in memento mori jewellery because it's loaded with feeling. This is not a jewel to display wealth or status. It's highly personal."

Aston himself came to a tragic end. He was a courtier, theologian, soldier and poet who, having trained in law, entered parliament and was high sheriff for Cheshire. Knighted by King Charles I, he fought for the royalist cause in the civil war before his capture by parliamentary forces in Staffordshire. Aged just 44, he died from wounds received in attempting to escape.

Fiona Corridan of Manchester [Art Gallery](#) said: "It's incredibly exciting to learn that the mourning pendant depicted in the painting exists and that it reflects the inscriptions in the painting.

"This intricate, beautiful piece ... is steeped in history, carrying a unique story of grief, love and memory across centuries. It would be wonderful to find out more and perhaps re-unite the pendant with the painting."

Downer will unveil the pendant to the public at the [Treasure House Fair](#) at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, which runs from 24 to 30 June.