

# Take this Token transcript

## Episode 7: Tokens of Style

**Kathleen Palmer:** I'm Kathleen Palmer, Curator of Exhibitions and Displays at London's Foundling Museum. *Take this Token* is a podcast about tiny objects steeped in history and emotion: the Foundling tokens.

The Foundling Hospital was one of Britain's first children's homes established in London in 1739. In its early days, anyone giving a baby into its care would also leave a token. This might be a ring, a metal, a poem, a playing card, or even a hazelnut. Many of these precious, highly personal objects are on display today at the Foundling Museum in Bloomsbury. We've been talking to people with a connection to the Museum. In this podcast, they take one token and share what they know, what they feel and what they imagine.

### Episode 6: Tokens of Style

Today, we turn our attention to a couple of tokens that could be easily overlooked: a simple hair pin and a squashed thimble. But these humble objects can tell us so much.

**Serena Dyer:** I think that that's what's so important about the Foundling tokens is that there's so many emotional resonances around them that we may not ever be able to access. But that doesn't mean that they're not there and that they're not still kind of held within those objects.

**Kathleen:** That's Serena Dyer.

**Serena:** I am a historian of shopping fashion and material culture in the eighteenth century. The huge range of tokens that are here at the Foundling Museum has been such a fantastic insight into the very kind of normal everyday objects that were around people in the eighteenth century, but otherwise would have been lost, that have been discarded, that have rolled between floor boards in houses.

So it's very unlike any other collection in that way because they're so capable of reflecting a really broad range of emotional responses. And

they also give that opportunity to think imaginatively and creatively about the past.

The token that I've chosen is a hairpin, which is a very simple and quite rustic looking length of metal, which has been bent in half in the middle. It's about five centimetres long and about a centimetre wide. And this would be woven through women's hair to hold the elaborate hairstyles that were fashionable in the eighteenth century in place.

I chose this token because it's a really important part of how women, particularly poorer women, enabled themselves to stay fashionable in the eighteenth century. So fabrics and garments were really expensive, and often women, poorer women, were wearing second-hand garments that have been refashioned and remade.

But hair was a really important way that they could actually keep up with fashion. And hair is also a really important part of fashion. In the eighteenth century we see a lot of fashion plates – which are essentially the illustrations in the *Vogue* of the eighteenth century – which show lots of different hairstyles that would be fashionable in that particular year.

So particularly in the mid to late-eighteenth century, they become a really important site for women showing their fashionability. And hair styles changed a lot during this period. There's some things that they all have in common. Women would've covered their hair in pomade, which is an animal fat product. And then on top of that, they would put powder, which is made from a type of corn starch, and both are really heavily fragranced. So women's hair really smelled very strongly of different normally floral scents.

And then once you've covered your hair in this mixture of ingredients, it becomes very malleable. You can really shape it into the styles that you want. So in the 1750s, these styles were still quite close to the head. You had a lot of what were known as buckles, which are actually rolls of hair that are put around the side of the head, and then you'd normally plait up the back and loop that up.

As we move into the later 1760s and early 1770s, that's when we get those really elaborate, sort of quintessential eighteenth century high hairstyles. Now, a lot of the time we think that those were achieved with wigs, but they weren't. They were women's real hair, sometimes assisted

with some pads and some sort of hair pieces, but they were based upon women's real hair.

So women tended to place a pad on top of the head. And then comb their own hair with the assistance of the pomade and powder to keep it in place over the top of the pad and use hairpins like the token one to hold that hair up at the top of that pad. It is really difficult to tell actually whether or not this hair pin was owned by somebody that was very poor cuz hair pins really were just these simple loops of metal. There wasn't that much difference between the fancy ones and the not fancy ones.

So this hairpin is a really important signifier of how important staying up with those fashionable hairstyles was to the woman that left it. She probably wouldn't have had a huge number of them. We don't need a huge number of them to keep those fashionable styles in place. They're very efficient. But it really spoke to me of that importance of fashionability beyond clothing – the other elements of the body that really, particularly towards the end of the century, became really vital for keeping up with fashion.

So obviously with very few of these tokens do we know who they genuinely belong to, but I really believe that history is very much the stories that we tell ourselves. There's so little of history that we can know for certain, and having the flexibility to think around who these things might have belonged to, the ways in which they might have been important to people, it's just as useful for the study of history.

So with this hairpin, I like to think that this could have been plucked from the hair of the mother. She could have been asked for a token on the doorstep of the Foundling Hospital, not had very much around her. Maybe all of her own personal possessions were just what was on her body at that time. And if she didn't have anything in her pockets – she'd reached inside, had a rummage, couldn't find anything there – she might have had to go to her hair and to one of the few hairpins that she had, giving her that fashionable look. And maybe even she'd done her hair particularly well for that morning, for meeting the people at the Hospital. So that's how I like to think of it, that she's reached up to one of her only options, reached up from her hair, pulled it out, maybe some of her hair has fallen down as she's done so. And she's giving away one of her few very useful, very valuable possessions alongside that horrible act of having to give up her child as well.

**Kathleen:** Serena imagined a mother rummaging in her pocket, looking for an object to leave as a token. For Ariane Fennetaux, who we'll hear from now, pockets can tell us a lot about women's lives in the eighteenth century.

**Ariane Fennetaux:** Women's pockets are fascinating because in a way they encapsulate in a small form a lot of issues related to women's lives and experience in the past. They are related to women's mobility. They are related to women's work, because working women would use their pockets to put anything they needed for their work, for their labour.

They are related to women's domestic role, because this is where you would keep your needlework implements, that you always had on hand. But they're also related to women's privacy, because they were often the only space that women could control.

My name is Ariane Fennetaux and I'm Associate Professor at Université Paris Cité. I'm a historian of textile and dress, and I co-wrote a book on the history of women's tie-on pockets in the eighteenth and nineteenth century with Barbara Burman. From the end of the seventeenth century, till the very end of the nineteenth century, women had different types of pockets to what we know of as pockets today. We refer to them to distinguish them as "tie-on pockets". And the term tie-on pockets comes from the fact that these were separate of clothing or accessories that were attached to a tape or a ribbon and a woman would tie it around her waist under her dress. Usually a pear shape or a tear drop shape with a vertical opening down the middle. They came as singles or as pairs and you would get to them because in the side of women's gowns or petticoats openings were left open and this is how the hand would penetrate through the different layers of clothing to locate the pocket.

These detached pockets were actually very, very practical - they were huge. I'm talking 20 centimetres deep would be a rather small pocket. A more average standard size would be 40 centimetres deep. You've got to remember that for most of this period, women had some kind of structure under their dress, either formed by layers of petticoats, or for more wealthy women by hoops, which would hide the bulk formed by the pockets under the clothing. So it wouldn't deform the shape, so they were extremely practical. If they got too heavy, you could take them off. And the pockets themselves could be placed under your pillow at night.

Women, especially the women who had no secure households, lived in shared accommodation, six, seven, eight, ten people in the one room. So securing your possessions, could be very tricky. The safest place for anything precious would be close to your body. And at night, being able to put your pocket under your pillow was the best way of securing your items. Which is why you come across that practice of putting the pockets under the pillow at night in crime records. Because this is women explaining that they were careful, they hadn't left their possessions lying around.

So I've chosen this thimble in the collection of tokens from the Foundling Museum. It's a silver thimble, which is squashed, and visibly worn, which I really liked. So it seems to have been used before it was left with a baby boy, at the Foundling. The reason this thimble resonated is the research I did on pockets is that thimbles are one of the most common items found in women's pockets. When you look at crime records or ads for lost pockets – which allow the historian to know what women kept in their pockets – one of the most common items you find beyond money, obviously, is needlework implements. And thimbles, whether silver, brass or common metal, is the ubiquitous needlework implement.

It's an item that obviously goes onto a woman's body, it fits your finger. So it's a very personal item, but it's also an item which speaks about women's activities at the time. A thimble could be just a personal item, something you would use to mend linen, but it was also a tool of the trade for people who made a living from needle work, which was one of the ready avenues for work for women at the time, either as domestic servants or as piece workers.

So a thimble is a small item, but it could promise wage work to a woman. So it was a very important implement, in a way a passport for work, something that's enabled a woman to make a living for herself and her family, her children.

A thimble was also often an object that was given as a token, a token of friendship or a token of love. One of those small accessories that were personal because they were kept in the pocket, they were kept in close proximity to a woman's body. The fact that this thimble is worn shows that it was used. It might have been given to the woman who then left it, by maybe her mother, and it might have been used by more than one woman.

But the fact that it's deformed, it's flattened, I'm not too sure what to make of it. Initially I thought maybe it's because parting with a silver thimble in a way was a sacrifice. It's not only something that can be turned into work. It's not only something that might have a sentimental value, but it's also something that has an intrinsic value because it's made of precious metal. I struggled to think that it would've been discarded because it was dysfunctional, because surely you could put it back into shape easily enough. So was it crushed to fit in the ledgers or was it crushed by the woman as a gesture of surrender? Maybe it's a symbolic passage from one status of the object to another status, not a useful object anymore, but an object of memory, a token really.

When you look at the collection of tokens and you see their small size, but also the type of objects they are, you think that all of them could potentially have lived inside a woman's pocket. And you can picture it in your mind, how when a woman was pushed to extremes and had to abandon their babies, they would've put their hand in their pocket and selected out of the different objects they had there one that was particularly significant, that was particularly remarkable because obviously they have to leave something that is remarkable enough that it can be recognised years later.

**Kathleen:** You can see Serena's hairpin and Ariane's thimble on display at the Foundling Museum, Brunswick Square in Bloomsbury, London, along with many other tokens.

The Museum is open Tuesday to Saturday from 10 till 5 and Sunday, 11 till 5. For more information, visit [foundlingmuseum.org.uk](http://foundlingmuseum.org.uk), or find us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

In the next episode, we trace the tokens' global connections with historians, Helen Berry and John Styles.

You've been listening to *Take this Token*, a Foundling Museum podcast with me, Kathleen Palmer, written and produced by Minnie Scott with Louis Mealing. Music by Ben Jacob.

*Take this Token* is supported by the Artisa Foundation.