

## **The Mystery of the Black Fans**

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The year is 1865 and you are in Washington DC to pay respects to the great President Lincoln, Old Honest Abe, who was recently assassinated and is lying in state. Following the long line of people who will pay their respects to the open coffin, you enter the hot room which smells of dust and old paper. There is small chit-chat here and there. Many are dressed in heavy black suits and dresses. The one thing that distracts you the most is the motion of black fans, carried by a number of women in the crowd. With leather handles and folded black cotton fabric, these expensive-looking fans are something we seldom see at funerals today.

In fact, these fans, called mourning fans, were a 19th century memento mori. Literally meaning “remember death,” memento mori were objects used to remind their owners that death comes for us all. Popular forms of memento mori in the 1800s included paintings of skulls, photos of the deceased—often propped up and made to look as life-like as possible for the camera—and locks of hair from loved ones who had passed on.

Displayed in homes in addition to being used at funerals, mourning fans were often ornate, sometimes decorated with feathers or lace—one design even depicted an owl perched on top, that nighttime creature who watches over us while we sit unaware of what is lurking outside our windows. These fans made the perfect memento mori, as they were objects one would not throw away because of their cost and value, but would want to keep and display, a haunting reminder to their owners that someone else might one day use these fans at their own funerals.

*This transcript of “The Mystery of the Black Fans” is part of the Humanities Kansas Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org) or call 1-888-416-2018.*