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3.1. Glamour and grieving: How the Victorians dressed for death

(CNN) -- Today, mourning a death in the family often means donning the most formal black outfit in one's closet for one solemn afternoon. But 150 years ago, it was a reason to stash away one's current best and purchase a whole new grief-appropriate wardrobe. During the Victoria era, mourning rivaled weddings in terms of pomp, etiquette and fashion -- a theme explored at the latest exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute. *Death Becomes Her: A Century of Mourning Attire* focuses on the boom years of the mourning industry, from 1815 to 1915, when the rich and middle class alike paid through the nose to look properly anguished and fashion magazines devoted pages to the most coveted fashions for the grieving style plate. "It's an intersection of fashion with what can be a very personal projection of grief," explains Jessica Regan, assistant curator of the exhibition. Grieving, Victorian style Throughout the West's upper classes, mourning was not to be taken lightly. Whereas men were largely allowed to get on with their lives, for women, mourning was a job in itself. A widow could be expected to visually grieve for more than two years (although the loss of a child or parents only required one.) The most prominent part of this display was mourning dress, which was meant to be a visible manifestation of grief. A 1863 diary entry from a Tennessee teenager named Nannie Haskins, which will be projected at the exhibition, makes the correlation plain: "What do I care whether it becomes me or not? I don't wear black because it becomes me. ... I wear mourning because it corresponds with my feelings." How some whisky lovers are now making millions But this didn't stop mourners from dressing fashionably. While the lower classes would often dye their existing garments black in response to the death of a loved one, the upper classes -- and later middle classes -- bought new wardrobes of black gowns, parasols, bonnets and brooches. Expensive mourning crepe, a stiff crinkled silk gauze with a matte finish, became the "iconic fabric of bereavement," according to Regan. The discerning sought out unfading black textiles, since true black -- black that wouldn't fade to brown or blue -- was as much a display of personal wealth as it was of grief. The most famous example of this dedication to mourning dress was the so-called Black Ascot of 1910. When Edward VII died a few days before the horse races, the British aristocracy attended in elegant black regalia (impressive hats included) that reflected the top trends of the time. "(Mourning dress) was a way of sharing one's grief with the community, (but) it certainly was also a display of economic and social status." Mourning goes mainstream Like most industries, the mourning business was invigorated by the industrial revolution, which made textile production faster and cheaper. This made it possible and profitable to bring specialized mourning fabrics, once restricted to the very wealthy, to the middle class. Striking photos reveal hidden history of black Britons in the Victorian era "The industrialization of textiles became affordable to a much broader segment of society," says Regan. "Retailers of mourning goods developed on a much grander scale and target middle-class consumers taking advantage of these readily available textiles." The industry was also further propelled by the birth of the fashion magazine, which brought both high fashion and upper class sensibilities to the attention of the working class consumers. "This gave a broad segment a clear view of what standards of mourning attire were through fashion illustrations and detailed descriptions," Regan says. The death of funereal fashion But mourning traditions started to decline soon after their peak. By the early 20th century, dress