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Memento Mori Memorial Ring of the 10th Viscount Kilmorey

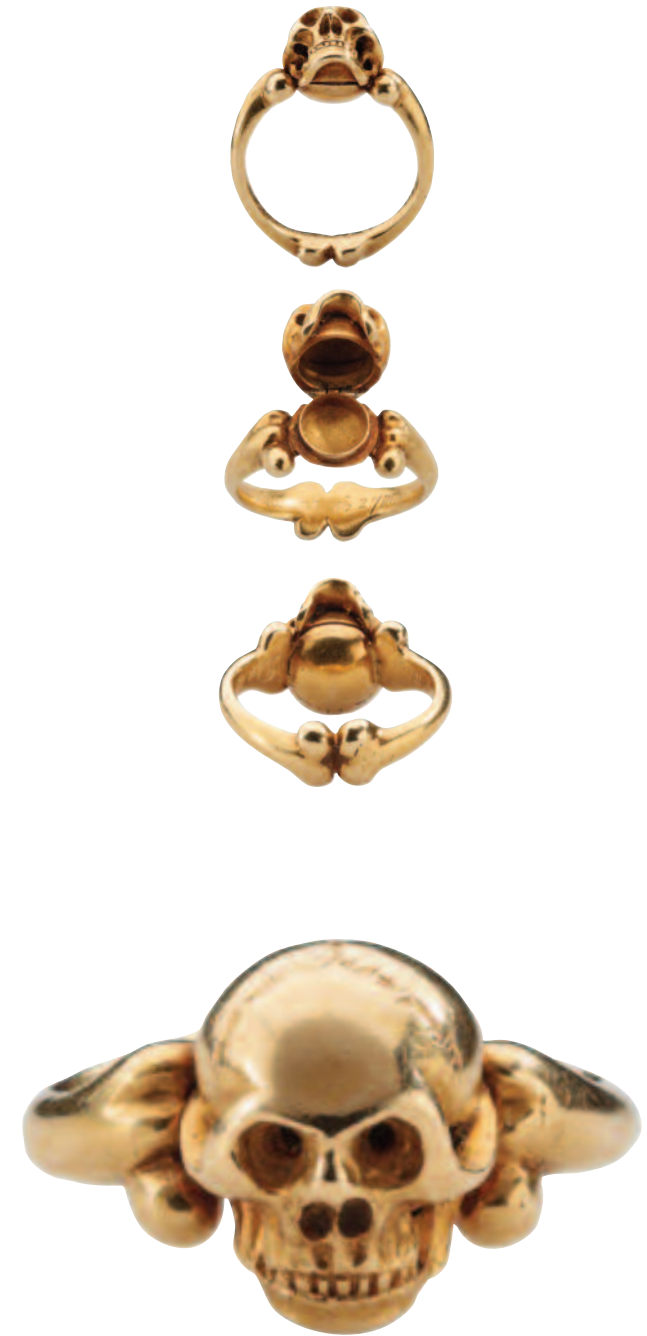
England, c. 1700

Height 23.45 mm; exterior diam. of hoop 18.14 mm; bezel 11.18 x 9.07 mm
Weight 6.3 grams
U.S. size 1; U.K. size B

The hoop of this gold locket ring is composed of two bones supporting the hinged death's head bezel with cavity. The inside of the bones are inscribed John Needham Viscount OB 27 MAY 1791 AET 81.

As a container for a personal relic such as a lock or curl of the hair of a deceased individual, to keep him "in remembrance," the locket bezel offered an alternative to the hollow hoop ring. The strongly sculptural character of the realistic death's head and of the substantial pair of bones supporting it is an unusual feature, for in the majority of English rings the *memento mori* symbols lie flat on the metal surfaces.

The message sent out by the ring is an unmistakable admonition to prepare for death, following the teaching of the influential Reverend Jeremy Taylor: "It is a great art to die well and to be learnt by men in health: he that prepares not for death before his last sickness is like him that begins to study philosophy when he is going to dispute publicly in the faculty. Learning duties requires study and skill, time and understanding in the way of godliness. Place your coffin in your own eye, dig your own grave."¹ In this spirit, *memento mori* motifs and inscriptions met the eye almost everywhere – on the exterior decoration of town houses, on dishes for eating and beakers for drinking, and some people, such as John Evelyn, posed for their portraits beside a skull.² Similarly, jewels and rings were decorated with skulls and skeletons, as John Fletcher alluded in his play *The Chances* first published in the Beaumont and Fletcher folio in 1647: "I'll keep it as they keep death's heads in rings, to cry Memento to me."



Although inscribed with the name, title, and date of death of John Needham, posthumous son of the 7th Viscount Kilmorey, who in 1768 succeeded his two childless elder brothers as the 10th Viscount Kilmorey, the ring seems closer to examples dating from the life of his father, the 7th Viscount (1683–1710), than to those in fashion at the time of his death at the end of the century. Since the Neoclassical mourning ring of the late eighteenth century is much less admonitory, featuring funerary urns on pedestals, and elegantly draped women seated under cypress trees or weeping willows, the present example could have been kept in the family until brought out for use as a memorial ring on the death of the eighty-one-year-old 10th Viscount in 1791. After a brief career in the army on assuming the title, he devoted himself to his Shropshire estates, where he was painted around 1768 by Thomas Gainsborough as the epitome of the prosperous Georgian country landowner.³ (DS)

Provenance: Benjamin Zucker, New York; on deposit, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 1985–2013.

Literature: Scarisbrick, 2007 [repr. 2013], no. 225.

Notes

¹ Taylor 1651, vii.

² Robert Walker, Portrait of John Evelyn, 1648, National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG 6179.

³ Now in Tate Britain, Millbank, London, N04777.



This is one of the finest examples of *memento mori* rings, the shoulders chased with scrolled leaves and with two graduated diamonds, and the bezel shaped to connote both the skull and cross-bones in black and white enamel and diamonds in the eyes, nose, and elsewhere.

Memento Mori ring
Netherlands, 17th century
(Oxford, Ashmolean Museum,
University of Oxford, WA1897.CDEF.F476)

Memento mori jewelry was not restricted to rings, as this fire gilt copper skull, worn suspended as a pendant, demonstrates. Worn as talismans, skull rings and pendants often opened to disclose containers, in the case of the present example the opened skull revealing on one side three tiny relics of saints and on the other side a monstrosity. The articulated jaw of this example enhances its character as a memento mori, reminding the beholder of his mortality while placing him under the protection of the saints.



Memento Mori pendant
Germany, 17th century
(Les Enluminures)