

Memento Mori: Photographing the Dead

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These days, when you talk about photographing the dead, most people think about capturing apparitions or orbs. But in the early stages of photography, the concept had an entirely different meaning.

With the affordability of new photographic techniques came the practice of memento mori (“remember death”) — or post-mortem photography — in which people hired photographers to photograph the corpses of their loved ones before burial. This sometimes included the remains of deceased pets.

Though now seen as a macabre practice and used as otherworldly movie props in such films as *The Others* to build supernatural suspense, in the mid-1800s photographing the deceased became a culturally accepted practice to help memorialize the dead and help with the grieving process.

The Rise of Memento Mori Photography

In 1839, portraiture became commonplace, as inventions like the daguerreotype (an early kind of photograph) made it possible for the masses to afford to have



The practice of memento mori (or post-mortem photography) gained popularity in the mid-1800s. It was practiced to help relatives of the deceased memorialize the dead, helping with the grieving process.

their pictures taken. The shorter exposure times made sitting for a portrait not only feasible but more practical than it had been in previous years.

Hitting the height of its popularity in the mid-19th Century and

dwindling toward the late 1800s, post-mortem photography persisted well into the 20th Century in some Eastern European cultures. What, by today’s standards, may seem morbid was, in fact, a reflection of the average 19th Century person’s ability to understand and deal with death.

These pictures were often included on mantle places, mingled with pictures of the living, or sent to distant relatives who could not make the trip to pay their respects.

High mortality rates meant many people didn’t always have the opportunity to get their picture taken when they were alive. Every household was touched by death. According to Ancestry.com, “In the United States in 1850, the average life expectancy at birth was 38.9 years” and the “infant mortality rate in 1850 was 217.4 per 1,000 births.”

It is this high mortality rate in children that accounts for the numerous post-mortem images of Victorian children. With so much death, the Victorians were more adept at dealing with the grieving process than we are today, and these



Photos of the dead sometimes included living relatives posing with or, in the case of a young child, holding the deceased. Children normally were posed on a couch or crib. When they were held by a living parent, they were posed with their eyes closed. Sometimes deceased pets were also photographed.

photographs were an important step in their process.

Different Methods of Photographing the Dead

Earlier photographs were often close-ups of the adult’s face or full body shots of a child. Loved ones were rarely posed in a coffin. Before the advent of the funeral home, bodies were laid out in at home in a parlor, kept cool by a block of ice. It’s not so unusual then that people would want to remember their loved one in a natural setting.

Often, they were laid out on a bed or couch to look as if they slept, or arranged in poses meant to mimic the living. Props, such as toys, religious items, or flowers were added to the scene. In some cases eyes were left open or the photographs were later doctored to paint pupils over the closed eye lids and to add a rosy flush to the cheeks.

Sometimes even the living rela-

tives were included in the photograph, posing with or, in the case of a young child, holding the deceased. Children normally were posed on a couch or crib. When they were held by a living parent, they were posed with their eyes closed.

Adults were more commonly

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pictured sitting up in chairs, braced into place by special frames. It wasn’t until embalming practices improved after the Civil War that people could be preserved long enough to be photographed inside their coffins, which were made to order and not readily available the day of death. By the

time corpses were photographed in coffins, less effort was made to make them appear more lifelike.

Other variations of post-mortem photography included mourners holding a photo of the deceased, family members photographed by a shrine dedicated to the passed loved one (including a photo from the deceased’s life), or the funeral goers surrounding the open coffin.

Today, Post-Mortem Photos Are Collected

Today, post-mortem photograph is more of a strange curiosity to be wondered at and collected. One of the largest collections in the United States is kept by the Burns Archive at www.burnsarchive.com.

Other web sources include Paul Frecker at www.paulfrecker.com and at The Thanatos (<http://thanatos.net>). All three of these sites show a tasteful representation of the subject and are not gory. ■