

REMEMBERING DEATH

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Perhaps our first reaction to these pictures is one of shock. We are startled by the strange practice the people of the 1800s had of photographing their deceased loved ones. Today, though post-mortem photography still exists, it is not a common thing to do.

When we look a little longer and deeper, we begin to feel the heartbreaking poignancy of these images. Looking into the eyes of a grieving mother, or seeing on the face of a child the ravages of the disease it suffered from, our hearts begin to ache. We feel the terrible presence of death, but not in the way we are used to. There is an intimacy, a loving quality in these photographs that we do not associate with images of death, and so they look “shocking” to us.

The Victorians knew death much more deeply and intimately than we do now. Death was present, a reality, not the abstraction it is to us today. Rather than shutting it away, people of that period acknowledged their relationship to death

with beauty. They honored their love for the deceased through painting, sculpture, jewelry, clothing, and photography.

In contrast, when death comes close to us in the modern world, we don’t really know how to act. Somebody dies, and the body is whisked away as quickly as possible. Grieving is awkward. Mostly people really don’t know what to say or do. It’s just hoped that we can “get back to normal” as soon as possible. Instead of funerals, we have “celebrations of life.” We all just want to think positively, be healthy, get to work, do something productive. Modern capitalist society expects manic optimism from us. Death becomes an indignity, an embarrassment to be ignored as much as possible, almost an obscenity. Each of us must deal with it silently, privately, because speaking about our loss is not really acceptable.

Yet images of death surround us. It is presented to us mainly in the cold, dispassionate light of the news media, where it is blandly

reported over and over again, the repetition only causing it to become more distant and unreal. Occasionally, some extraordinarily awful news story will break through our shell, and for a moment or two we will be flooded by scorching waves of compassion or sickening moments of terror, but we put those feelings away as quickly as we can, and get on with our busy day.

Though the natural emotions associated with death are repressed, images of death emerge in our culture with ever increasing strength, frequency, and ferocity, repeating endlessly and ever more graphically in television shows, video games, and the movies. Our horror movies need always to be more appalling, our video games more violent, our Halloween decorations (which have exploded in popularity) more disgustingly grotesque, to penetrate the numbness of our denial.

Perhaps the price we pay for our casual dismissal of death is the feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness that permeates our lives, a sense of

malaise or depression. Our ideas about death are, by necessity, interwoven with our ideas and feelings about the significance and meaning of our lives and our place in the cosmos. When we ignore and deny death, we become hollow, less alive. Acknowledging and honoring death makes us slow down; it makes us reflect and deepen. It shuts up the chatter we cram into our heads to escape the silence. And maybe what we need more than anything else is some silence, some stillness, some deepening.

In a sense, these photographs are like ghosts. They are the shadows of people who once lived actively and breathed in a present moment, who saw the blue sky above their heads and might have felt the same passions, joys, and sorrows in their hearts that we feel in our own. If we can quiet ourselves enough to spend some time with these ghosts, contemplating, listening to them, we may learn from their great wisdom. It is the wisdom of the ancestors, of those who came before. What we are, so once were they. What they are, so we shall be.

*Death loves to be represented.
An image can retain some of the obscure,
repressed meanings that the written word filters out.
Hence its power to move us so deeply.*

— PHILIPPE ARIÈS, *WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEATH*



Memorial Pendant circa 1870 • vulcanite/tintype • 2" x 1.25"

A small vulcanite pendant with four miniature tintypes inside.

The cross, anchor and heart on this piece represent faith, hope and charity.

These symbols were found frequently in nineteenth-century cemetery art, funeral flowers, and mourning jewelry.

MEMORY KEEPERS:

Photography as a Form of Remembrance

Louis Daguerre's introduction of the daguerreotype and photographic process in 1839 must have seemed nothing short of miraculous to the early Victorians. Photographs were small wonders to cherish, display, reflect upon, and remember by. They were, in a way, memory keepers.

The tradition of memorial portraiture existed long before the invention of the daguerreotype. Painted portraits and, in particular, deathbed scenes were expensive—luxury items commissioned by the wealthy. In the 1850s and 1860s, as photography studios became more widespread, and newer, less costly formats were introduced, the number of photographs being produced grew exponentially; the 1860s and 70s represented the height of the post-mortem photography genre.

As these photographs show, death was not hidden away, but prepared for, both mentally and spiritually, and celebrated through religious ceremony, mourning rituals, elaborate floral funeral displays and through the funerals themselves. They served as a vital part of a healthy grieving process, providing a tangible way to keep the memory of a departed loved one alive

and close at hand in times of need, displayed in parlors and in family photo albums, side by side with photos of the living.

Beyond the Dark Veil features more than 180 photographs and related ephemera, carefully selected from the collection of The Thanatos Archive, documenting the practice of nineteenth-century post-mortem and memorial photography and related aspects of mourning customs.

The photographs are not presented as morbid curiosities but as objects with stories to tell; images of people in death that are possibly the only remaining testament to their lives and moments in time, now long past. They give us a rare glimpse into a bygone era. While a few of the people in these photographs are identified, most of them will remain nameless to us forever, the details of their lives and deaths something we can only speculate upon through clues revealed in these lasting images of them. Memories of the lost live on through their likenesses, the sum of their lives encompassed and encapsulated on metal, glass, and paper—captured shadows continuing to tell the story of their fleeting substance to all who are willing to listen.

JACQUELINE ANN BUNGE, Exhibition Curator
JACK MORD, Owner and Operator, The Thanatos Archive



Waiting for Death circa 1856 • sixth-plate daguerreotype • 3.75" x 3.25"

Portrait of a dying child, photographed in Waltham, Massachusetts, by Henry F. Warren.