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A Morbid Remembrance?

The Purpose of Nineteenth-Century Victorian Death Portraits

ABSTRACT: *Nineteenth-century Victorians used the evolving convenience of photography to domesticize death portraiture, which, in turn, proved to be a useful tool in their mourning practices. This essay examines individual, family, and hidden mother death portraits from The Thanatos Archive. Death portraiture may be considered morbid, but to the Victorians this practice created an everlasting memory of a loved one, an opportunity to capture one last family photo, and an outlet for mourning.*

KEYWORDS: *U.S. history; nineteenth century; Victorian era; death; family; memory; death practices; death portraits; photography; daguerreotypes*

Introduction

Imagine a time when the only photo you owned of your child and spouse would be their death portrait. During the Victorian era, post-mortem photography was a common phenomenon, much like school pictures today. In fact, ever since the birth of photography in 1839 and well until the 1920s, post-mortem portraits were used as a medium of mourning and remembrance. When photography was still in its early days and rather expensive, the Victorians rarely made use of it more than once or twice during their lives. Photos were typically taken on the occasion of two major life events, namely, marriage and death. In *Figure 1 (Together in Death)*, a post-mortem portrait taken in 1854, we see a young woman holding a newborn tightly in her arms. Both seem to be sleeping peacefully but, in actuality, they are deceased. The most jarring aspect of this portrait may well be why it was taken in the first place. A man who had just lost the two most important people in his life – his wife and child – had likely commissioned it. He had become a widower, and he had lost his role as a father. The portrait certainly engenders sadness and perhaps regret, but it was commissioned regardless of the sorrowful emotions it evokes. For their practice of commissioning and taking post-mortem portraits, the Victorians have been charged with a fascination with death. However, such an accusation is misplaced, because Victorian post-mortem portraits have nothing to do with any such twisted obsession with death.¹ The Victorians engaged in this practice because it was the most accurate way to capture the likeness of their deceased loved ones before the latter would be buried and, yes, decompose. Thus, for the Victorians, post-mortem photography was simply a method of

¹ Lyn Hunter, “A Victorian Obsession with Death: Fetishistic Rituals Helped Survivors Cope with Loss of Loved Ones,” article on a lecture by Dr. Carol T. Christ (University of California, Berkeley) on March 21, 2000, *The Berkeleyan* 28, no. 27 (April 5-11, 2000). On the topics addressed in this essay, see also Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Altadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1990); Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); Elizabeth Paris, “Suspension of Grief (and Disbelief): The Evolution of Postmortem Photography in Nineteenth-Century America” (master’s thesis, University of Texas at San Antonio, 2015).

remembrance. In cases like *Figure 1*, the post-mortem photograph may have been a widower's only opportunity to obtain a portrait of his wife and child.



Figure 1: "Together in Death" (1854). Image Courtesy of *The Thanatos Archive*. Used by Permission (*The Thanatos Archive*).

Although death is inevitable, it is a subject largely avoided in modern society. It is seen as distant, something that should only be addressed when it happens, and an uncomfortable reminder of mortality. Today, death occurs behind closed doors. Scenes of dying are frequently confined to hospitals, and the preparation of bodies for burial is in the hands of professionals. Death has become the least domestic affair, but this was quite the opposite for the Americans and Europeans of the nineteenth century. According to Jacqueline Bunge and Sue Henger, "[f]or the Victorians, the Angel of death was always close, he lurked in the slums, spreading typhoid and scarlet fever and stalked the battlefields of the Civil War, riding the bullets that blew young men to bits."² For them, death was not a distant concept, it was present, a reality, and not the mere abstraction it is to us today.³

² Jacqueline Bunge and Sue Henger, eds., *Beyond the Dark Veil: Post-Mortem and Mourning Photography from the Thanatos Archive* (Fullerton, CA: Prolong Press LTD, 2014), 143.

³ Bunge and Henger, *Beyond the Dark Veil*, 7.

Yet, just because the experience and understanding of death and related practices have changed over time, this does not imply that Victorian practices were morbid.

In the Victorian era, post-mortem photography was an expression of mourning, not an example of fascination with death. Photography was simply a new tool in the toolbox of the Victorian grieving process. When photography entered the scene, the average life expectancy for both men and women was thirty-five years.⁴ Thus, the Victorians' concept of old age was half of what it is today. Well into the twentieth century, people died in their homes, making it a prime location for post-mortem photography. Death was no stranger to the Victorians.⁵ Their desire to make death portraits was a socially accepted and appropriate behavior supported by the culture of their time. One could publicly display these photographs without fear of being viewed as pathological.⁶

In the 1840s, death portraits were still considered a luxury, but photography soon evolved into a less exclusive commodity. Eventually, middle-class and upper-class Victorians were able to commission death portraits without breaking the bank. Based on the clothing and backgrounds of most post-mortem photographs, the custom appears to have predominant among the middle class.⁷ The Victorians had a heightened sense of themselves and of the importance of life; therefore, they sought to preserve memorable life events. Indeed, they did not just preserve memory by means of death portraiture, they also devoted themselves to the construction and endowment of museums and other public memorials, and the American Civil War afforded them with a large-scale opportunity to memorialize individuals, locations, and events. According to Jay Ruby's work *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (1995), the nineteenth century belonged to the middle class when it came to mourning and remembrance.⁸

Post-mortem photography was primarily practiced by Americans and by the English, and it encompassed people of many ethnicities. Although death portraiture was primarily used by Caucasians, there is evidence of its use for other ethnicities. For example, a post-mortem photograph taken around 1900 in Amherst, Massachusetts, features the head and shoulders of a young African American woman.⁹ Her death portrait is rather extraordinary both with regard to its subject and design. The portrait is vignettted, the woman is shown at a ninety-degree angle, and one almost gets the impression that the woman is alive. Such

⁴ Bunge and Henger, *Beyond the Dark Veil*, 28.

⁵ Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A Social History of Photography* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 33.

⁶ Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 188.

⁷ Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 51.

⁸ Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 61.

⁹ "Vignettted Post-Mortem Photograph of an Unidentified African American Woman," Amherst, Massachusetts, ca. 1880-1909, gelatin silver print, Penn State University Libraries, Jay Ruby Collection on the Photographic Representation of Death, call number 1757, box 1.

design choices were clearly intentional and provide an insight into how her relatives wanted to remember her. Death portraits could be composed exactly in accordance with the wishes of the deceased's family, and customization was the norm rather than the exception

I. A Family Affair

Death portraits were both private and familial. The Victorians' death customs revolved around domestic scenes and spaces,¹⁰ and post-mortem photography brought families together both inside and outside of the frame. In fact, the deceased were not always the only ones featured in these death portraits. It was a common practice for family members to participate by posing with a deceased loved one. For example, *Figure 2 (Three Sisters)*, a post-mortem portrait taken in 1857, shows two young girls with the body of their recently deceased sister.



Figure 2: "Three Sisters" (1857). Image Courtesy of [The Thanatos Archive](#). Used by Permission (The Thanatos Archive).

The oldest sister, pictured in the middle, looks directly ahead. Her gaze conveys a sense of melancholy, and she lightly supports her head by leaning it on her left hand. She wears a black mourning dress and a large cross around her neck. Her younger living sister is pictured on the left. She, too, looks directly ahead, but she supports her chin by leaning it on her right fist and appears more composed, even assertive. Her dress with its polka dots matches her gaze which is slightly less depressed than her sister's. The deceased sister, perhaps the youngest child, is lying in front with her head on a pillow on the right, and she looks as if she has just fallen asleep. Her arms are placed upon her upper body, her polka-dotted dress seems to match the dress of her living sister (on the left), and she is covered

¹⁰ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2008), 9.

by an ornate blanket. The two living sisters appear to be seated behind their deceased sibling's death bed, although there is no visible furniture, leading to the assumption that this portrait was taken in a studio. It is unclear what may have been going through the living sisters' heads. Perhaps their respective facial expressions are caused by the need to pose alongside their dead sister, or by the attempt to remain composed at a time of sincere grief, or perhaps by the effort to keep still to allow for the camera's long exposure time. At its inception in 1839, the daguerreotype necessitated an exposure time of about twenty minutes, but by 1841 this had been shortened to between thirty and ninety seconds.¹¹ Whether twenty minutes or two minutes, having to pose with a lifeless loved one must have been an absolutely heart-wrenching experience. Though distressing, these family portraits were a response to the hardship of losing a loved one. Posing for a short while with a deceased family member ensured a family portrait that would last for generations – much like the costly painted family portraits of the past.



Figure 3: "The Kramschusters" (1890). Image Courtesy of [The Thanatos Archive](#). Used by Permission (The Thanatos Archive).

Most Victorians died in their homes, surrounded by family. After their final breath, their body was prepared and laid out in the family parlor until the day of the funeral. Relatives and family friends would "visit" the deceased before the burial. The display of the body in the parlor afforded family and friends one last opportunity to memorialize the family as it had been—before death had subtracted a family member. Funerals brought extended families together one last time before one of them would be gone forever.

¹¹ Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, "Foreword," in Helmut Gernsheim, *Masterpieces of Victorian Photography* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1951), 95.

In *Figure 3 (The Kramschusters)*, a death portrait taken in 1890, ten members of a family pose with a deceased boy in the middle. Everyone's facial expression is somber, and all look directly at the camera—with the exception of the lady wearing glasses who is seated in front on the left, likely the boy's mother, who appears too saddened to look directly at the camera. Next to her is an empty chair which may have been intentionally placed there and left vacant as the seat of the deceased boy. Sitting for a death portrait was not just an opportunity for family members to gather and perhaps even conduct business outside of the frame,¹² it provided a chance for the entire family to grieve together. Thus, a post-mortem photograph like *Figure 3* gave the family a visual memento not just of the deceased but of each other as well.

II. Hidden Mothers

One particular genre of post-mortem photography that has garnered a lot of attention is the so-called "Hidden Mother" portrait. "Hidden Mother" portraits are similar to family death portraits in that they include both the living and the dead, but what is special about these portraits is that the living is partially obscured. They were labeled "Hidden Mother" portraits because they include a glimpse of a figure who—for the most part—was not in the frame, namely the deceased child's mother. An example is *Figure 4 (Hidden Mother)*, taken in 1890.



Figure 4: "Hidden Mother" (1890). Image Courtesy of [The Thanatos Archive](#). Used by Permission (The Thanatos Archive).

Figure 4 is the post-mortem photograph of a little girl who appears to be leaning against a draped black cloth. Her right foot seems slightly lifted off the ground,

¹² Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 97.

her eyes are closed, her chin is resting on her chest, and she is holding flowers in her hands. At first glance, it looks like she is leaning against the black sheet, but upon closer inspection one notices that there is someone under the black sheet propping her up. At the base of the young girl's feet, on the right, there is the skirt of a black dress, and the leg of a chair, on the right, is partly covered by the large black cloth. The person thus supporting this deceased little girl is either her mother or a close female relative. In post-mortem photography, it was a common practice for a mother to be holding her deceased child and for both to be fully visible. However, parents who chose to be "hidden" probably selected this artistic technique to make their child's death portrait appear more unique and "lifelike." Images like *Figure 4* represent the attempts of mothers to show their children just as they had looked before they had passed away. Moreover, the girl in *Figure 4* is intentionally pictured outside, as if she had just walked through a garden and picked some fresh flowers. The photograph was staged by the mother—and the photographer—to memorialize the little girl as engaged in typical daytime activities rather than asleep in her bed.



Figure 5: "Woman with Dead Son 1" (1862). Image Courtesy of [The Thanatos Archive](#). Used by Permission (The Thanatos Archive).

While the mother is difficult to spot in *Figure 4*, mothers in other "Hidden Mother" portraits can be more easily identified. In *Figure 5* (*Woman with Dead Son 1*), a death portrait taken in 1862, we see an infant standing on a chair and being held by an arm that is visible at the bottom of the infant's dress. It is reasonably safe to assume that the arm belongs to the infant's mother. The child is wearing a plaid dress, suggesting at first glance that we are dealing with a little girl. However, from the early modern period until the Victorian age, a dress-type outfit or gown was the customary garment for all children—for practical reasons: dress-type outfits were easy to put on and take off (both by parents and eventually

the children themselves), and they facilitated both the changing of diapers and eventually toilet training; thus, boys wore dress-type outfits for the first years of their lives until their “breeching,” namely, when they were granted their first pair of breeches. At the bottom left of *Figure 5*, one can see a child looking up. The child’s head is barely visible, but the viewer can see the hair, the right ear, and the right cheek. This may have been an attempt by the mother to capture one last family portrait of her two children, but it is unusual for the living child’s face to be hidden. Perhaps the latter was helping the mother prop up the deceased infant, but the rationale why this second child is in the portrait ultimately remains unknown. There is a second image of the same mother and deceased child: *Figure 6* (*Woman with Dead Son 2*) shows the mother prepping and adjusting her son’s body. This particular image may have not been taken intentionally, but it affords viewers a rare glimpse into the preparations that went into the taking of a death portrait. Most importantly, *Figure 6* shows the loving relationship between a mother and her deceased son as she arranges him precisely as she wants him to be remembered. Although this must have been difficult for her, it was an activity she chose to engage in to aid her in the grieving process.



Figure 6: “Woman with Dead Son 2” (1862). Image Courtesy of [The Thanatos Archive](#). Used by Permission (The Thanatos Archive).

Unfortunately, due to the lack of advanced medicine and prenatal care, most death portraits taken during the Victorian era were those of children. However, while these post-mortem portraits of children exist in great numbers, parents had their own unique ways of mourning and memorializing their children. Whether it was by placing them on a bed or by holding them up in front of a large black sheet, death portraits of children are prime examples of how grieving parents used photography to perpetuate their children’s visual memory.

Conclusion

Post-mortem photography afforded deceased Victorians a semblance of immortality because it was a new way to “cheat death.” Although it was by no means the first coping mechanism developed and used to accommodate death in society, the new Daguerreian portrait facilitated the comparatively fast and convenient creation of an image to be left for posterity. It gave comfort to the living because they could continue to “see” their loved ones after death. Even those who had not found the opportunity during their lifetime to have their portraits taken could be memorialized in death. During an era when death came early for many, it seemed only natural for the Victorians to take advantage of a new opportunity like photography to preserve the visual memory of their loved ones. In post-mortem photography, the deceased were not just physically present: they could be “eternally” present in the form of a portrait. Therefore, this practice had nothing to do with some twisted fascination with death; rather, it represents an effort to keep the memory of the dead alive. Photography offered nineteenth-century mourners a new and unique way to keep close those who had shared their past. In a letter to the English author Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855), Elizabeth Barrett reacts to a post-mortem daguerreotype as follows: “I would rather have such a memorial of one I dearly loved, than the noblest artist’s work ever produced.”¹³

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¹³ Quoted in Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 49.