Momento Mori

Photographs of dead babies – the “positive” aspects of a tragic subject

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In the Victorian city, life was cheap. During the age of the daguerreotype, one out of two babies born in the towns died before the age of five.*1*

The highest mortality rates occurred in the industrial slums where families crowded into crammed, dank rooms, and shared a single communal toilet (which was never cleaned) with perhaps forty other multifamily dwellings. They drew water from a courtyard tap supplied by the runoff from drains and cesspools, reused without “recycling.” In 1849, half of the population of London received its drinking water from a stretch of the Thames river into which more than 200 sewers emptied – and in that year alone, 16,000 Londoners died of cholera. Unpaved streets were awash with filth and sewage, combining a vile stench with the lung-destroying smog of sulphurous smoke from thousands of factory chimneys.

Even when the family was far removed from such industrial and urban squalor, such as in rural America, child survival was precarious at best, and could strike at any time. (One soldier, for example, rushed home from the Civil War in order to have his photograph taken with his dead child in his arms; he was James Garfield, later the President of the United States.)

Diseases ran rampant and joined with malnutrition and exhaustion to further increase the death rate among infants.

At the opposite end of the social scale, the chances of survival were better – but not good. Ignorance, fashion (women usually wore tight corsets until the eighth month of pregnancy), disease and lack of medical care, all contributed to high infant mortality. It was rare indeed not to have at least one child death in any family – a fact which remained true even through the first decades of the 20th century. Infectious diseases were no respecters of social status. Pneumonia, meningitis, diptheria, tuberculosis and influenza all took their toll, with a 20-40 per cent death rate. In one day 600 people died of influenza in New York City alone. It was not until penicillin appeared in 1928 (and began manufacture during World War II) that such devastation was eliminated.

In the daguerreotype era (from 1839 to the mid-1850s) dead babies were a fact of life - and good business for the photographer, especially in America.

One daguerreian studio made such post-mortem studies its major selling point:

Daguerreian Gallery for Sale - The only establishment in a city of 20,000 inhabitants, and where the pictures of deceased persons alone will pay all expenses.*2*

In another example of a photographer's advertisement, the owner promised that "I also hold myself in readiness to make pictures from Corpses if desired."*3*

Photographs of dead infants were such common commissions for local photographers that the photographic journals of the period often published how-to-do-it articles, advice on how to produce natural looking poses, and anecdotes of experiences during the portrait sessions.

A good example of instructive articles of the age appeared in the Photographic and Fine Arts Journal for 1854 in which the writer noted that:

All likenesses taken after death will of course only resemble the inanimate body, nor writ there appear in the portrait anything like life itself, except indeed the sleeping infant, on whose face the playful smile of innocence sometimes steals even after death. This may be and is oft-times transferred to silver plate.

Photographers often went to a great deal of trouble in order that their daguerreotype gave the impression of a "sleeping," not dead infant. This was the advice of N.C. Burgess in his article "Taking Portraits After Death": "If the portrait of an infant is to be taken, it may be placed in the mother's lap, and taken in the usual manner by a side light, representing sleep."*5* For an older child, Burgess recommended placing the body on a table and using a sheet as a reflector, "and very soon a good picture (is) produced." Corpses already in their coffins can still be taken, he said, "but not quite so conveniently, nor with so good results." He recommended placing the coffin near a window (so that the shadows appear below the nose and eyebrows) and insisted that "the coffin should not appear in the picture," but concealed by a shawl or piece of drapery.

As indicated by the last sentence, photographers were anxious to produce an image which gave the impression of life, not death. The "sleeping" infant device was most convenient but not ideal. The most admired post-mortem pictures were those in which the subject gave no indication of their deceased state. In a glowing tribute to a daguerreotype of a dead little boy, one critic wrote that "it has not the slightest expression of suffering, and nothing of that ghastliness and rigidity of outline and feature which usually render likenesses taken in sickness or after death so painfully revolting as to make them decidedly undesirable." On the contrary, said the reviewer:

. . . it has all the freshness and vivacity of a picture from a living original – the sweet composure – the serene and happy look of childhood. Even the eyes, incredible as it may seem, are not expressionless, but so natural that no one would imagine it could be a post-mortem execution.

And "no one" is right. Even today it is impossible to state with any certainty whether or not a daguerreotype of an infant is of a live or dead subject. A rule of thumb is that a sharp daguerreotype image of a baby probably means that he/she was dead. This only slightly facetious guide resulted from the notorious difficulty of keeping the child rigidly immobile during the long exposure times required by the daguerreotype process. Many extant daguerreotypes of family groups depict clear images of parents, whose heads were restrained by clamps, but with the child's face an indecipherable blur. Nevertheless, these images were treasured within the family as evocative documents.

It should be mentioned at this point that many professionals in the post mortem business, considered a painting of the dead child to be more valuable than a photograph. Even some photographers would have concurred. C. Brangwin Barnes, an English portraitist who ran a thriving studio, recommended that the photograph should be given to an artist, "then the relatives might have a portrait on which there would be some pleasure in looking, and that would recall to their memories their living child; instead of which an ordinary post-mortem portrait can only, at best, recall to their minds the child as it appeared after death."

A painter who seems to have specialized in this work, Adam Springfield of Rochester, New York, wrote to The Philadelphia Photographer (September 1868) offering advice to the photographer of the image which he would later copy ("under no circumstances must it be a view from below the chin," etc.)

Another artist, William Gookin of New Hampshire, advertised in the Dover Gazette and Stafford Advertiser (February and March, 1847) that he would photograph or paint anything "with the exception of taking Daguerreotype Miniatures of Deceased Persons," which he insisted "no one can do and give satisfaction." Paintings, he said, were preferable for "getting a good likeness."

Only the wealthy, however, could afford a painting of their dead baby – which usually cost the equivalent of a month's wages. In addition, the photograph, for all its faults, possessed a certain something.

There are many indications in the 19th-century press that the public's attachment to a photographic image exceeded a mere interest in "a mirror with a memory." This attachment was often so strong that owners reacted as intensely to the image as to the original subject. An editor in 1854 noted that the daguerreotype might be a "mere article of commerce" to the photographer but that it was transformed by love when received by the client: "The care exhibited in the charge of this memento is marked by a gentleness known and prompted only by pure love or the warmest friendship. No price can rectify the loss."*7* The writer underlined his point with a poignant story. A boat, the "San

Francisco," sank and took with it to the sea bed a daguerreotype. The owner, who was saved, offered a reward of $5,000 for the recovery of that picture. And it is worth pointing out that the average annual income at the time was one-tenth of the amount of the reward.

The writer, who was also a professional portraitist, found a moral in this story: "This fact is worthy of the consideration of those who are putting off obtaining Daguerreotype likenesses until a more convenient season."

The public's faith in the miracle of photography sometimes reached the point of spiritualism, even though spirit photography was not known until 1860, after the daguerreotype process was obsolete. Nine years earlier The Daguerreian Journal reported the following incident about a couple who had "put off" obtaining a photograph of their child:

*A lady and gentleman called in, and wished to be "Daguerreotyped together." When our arrangements were made, and they were about to "take a seat," the lady remarked, that she had lost a child about three months previous, and desired me to take them with her child upon her lap.*8

This story would have served to confirm the daguerreotypists' frequent admonition to their customers: "Secure the shadow ere the substance fade."

But for those who ignored the advice, the photographer was always willing to picture the corpse, and this was a common type of portraiture for American daguerreotypists right from the introduction of the process. It was also the earliest, and only, type of at-home portraiture. All living sitters visited the daguerreotypist's studio; all dead sitters stayed at home and were visited by the daguerreotypist. Exceptions were extremely rare. One reason was that the corpse did not require the paraphernalia of the studio, particularly the head-clamps; another, was that the presence of dead bodies in the studio would have deterred visits from living, and squeamish, customers.

The reminiscences of a photographer who had specialized in postmortem studies for 20 years stated in 1882 that "This is the first time . . . that I have ever been called upon to picture the dead (child) in my own place, but this case was such a peculiar one that I could not refuse, although it would *undoubtedly draw away customers* if it were known."*9* (my emphasis).

As will be evident from these dates, post-mortem photography continued beyond the daguerreotype era and throughout the wet-plate or collodion period (early 1850s to 1880s). One of the most fascinating accounts of one photographer's introduction, and subsequent experiences, in this area of photographic specialty was written by the previously quoted Philadelphia photographer under the title "Ghastly Photographic Experiences."

He began photographing the dead during the American Civil War and relates several intriguing stories about this conflict, including the time when his assistant was blown up by a shell at Antietam, when he was captured as a Union spy at Fredericksburg and interrogated by General Lee, when he was photographing corpses at another battle and, on the ground glass, saw a movement on one of the images . . . (albumen) prints of the battlefield dead “sold like wildfire at fifty cents and one dollar each. I was nearly two thousand dollars in pocket in less than two weeks.”*10*

After the Civil War he returned to “regular” photography but “Business grew dull, and I got poor.” He was then struck with an idea which “I have followed out successfully ever since.” He scanned the death columns of the morning papers, noted the time and date of the funeral, and visited the houses and offered to photograph their dead. In a couple of years his reputation grew until “now I am almost as frequently sent for as the minister.”

The reminiscences continue with examples of specially memorable sittings, including:

I once photographed two children – sisters – who had died the same day of diptheria. They were posed with their arms about each other’s necks. An Irish family, living in the southern part of the city, called on me about two years ago to take a picture of their dead son – a young man – with his high hat on. It was necessary to take the stiffened corpse out of the ice-box and prop him up against the wall. The effect was ghastly, but the family were delighted, and thought the hat lent a life-like effect. Sometimes, and at the suggestion of the family, I have filled out the emaciated cheeks of dead people with cotton to make them look plump. The eyes are nearly always propped open with pins or mucilage, but when people can afford to engage an artist it is an easy matter to paint the eyes afterward.

The matter-of-fact manner in which the photographer describes his encounters with corpses would have marked him as an American, even if he was otherwise unknown. English and European professionals did occasionally photograph dead people (especially if they were famous) but were much more reluctant to discuss their experiences and treated the whole field with some distaste.

The British Journal of Photography of 188311 considered that “This class of work is not of the pleasantest description” and was never undertaken by the principal himself and only on rare occasions by the chief operator, “that gentleman often refusing point blank to execute the work, even when it is to be done for one of the firm’s best clients.” The commission was usually assigned to an assistant. “As to whether work of this description should be accepted at all,” said the journal, “there are many arguments both for and against, but although the latter must be allowed to predominate, still the work goes on.”

The writer can only find one extenuating circumstance under which post-mortem photography is justified:

Usually it is a child the photographer is called upon to photograph, the reason being that most adults have at some period of their life been portrayed . . . but children are often cut off before they have ever been photographed, and the desire to have something to remember them by, and to recall their once-familiar features, must be taken as the excuse for the existence of this class of work at all.

A typical British reaction to post-mortem photography was produced by a memorial card bearing an image of the corpse. “It is sad enough to hear of people having the death bed horrors photographed at all,” wrote the columnist, “but to display it so wantonly, and to circulate it among friends, seems to us almost fanatical inhumanity. Our personal impulse, were we to receive such a ghastly memento, would be to commit it to the flames at once.”*12*

The differences in attitude, to post-mortem photography, between the British and American photographers of the 19th century would provide a fascinating and useful sociological study. In this context, however, it suffices to state that only in America was the corpse treated with such professional concern and casualness. European photographers fall somewhere between these two extremes – more complacent about death than the British, more reluctant to discuss the subject than the Americans.

When a Frenchman suggested a method by which more life-like pictures could be taken of corpses, a British journal not only considered the whole subject to be “gruesome” but also dismissed the suggestion as “too absurd to merit serious consideration.”*13*
But one concern shared by both British and European photographers, and which does not seem to have deterred Americans, was the fear of infection from contagious diseases which might be emitted by the corpse.

In 1891 an ordinance was introduced in Austria “absolutely forbidding the photographing of corpses in studios open to the public.” Commenting on this decree, the British Medical Journal was supportive of the decision but disapproving of the custom which prompted it. “It appears that a somewhat morbid custom exists among the Viennese of having the dead bodies of children and other persons dear to them photographed, and for this purpose the corpse used to be taken to the photographer’s studio.”*14*

By the 1890s post mortem photography was less common and it is doubtful if the above decree affected many people. The introduction of hand cameras and dry-plates was causing a massive slump in the professional's business. From the 1880s amateur photography was booming and it would have been much more likely that pictures of the living child would exist in the family album. The value and mystique of the unique image was being eliminated by the ubiquitous nature of photography.

Some effort was expended to find other means of preserving the dead child other than in the common form of a camera image. Perhaps the most bizarre was an invention which was given prominence in Scientific American of 1891: electroplating the dead. The idea was to preserve the body itself, “for eternity,” rather than a mere vulnerable paper image. The body was first made electrically conductive by “atomizing nitrate of silver on to it,” a stage which is the invention’s only connection to the photographic process. After several further stages, the body was immersed in a galvanizing bath “causing a one millimeter thick layer of metallic copper to be deposited on the skin.” The result, claimed the announcement, “is a brilliant red copper finish of exceptional strength and durability.” The illustration shows, significantly, the process of copperplating a dead baby.

References:

1. Victorian People and Ideas, Richard D. Altick, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., New York, 1973, p. 115.
2. Humphrey’s Journal, vol. V, no. 19, 15 January 1854, p. 302.
3. The complete advertisement is reproduced in The Photograph: A Social History, Michel Braive, 1966, p. 61.
4. The Photographic and Fine Art Journal, vol. VIII, no. 3, March 1855, p. 80.
5. Ibid.
6. The Photographic and Fine Art Journal, July 1855, p. 224.
7. Humphrey’s Journal, vol. V, no. 19, 15 January 1854, p. 297.
8. Daguerreian Journal, vol. I, no. 5, 15 January 1851, p. 149.
9. The Photographic Times and American Photographer, vol. XII, 1882, p. 111.
10. Ibid, p. 112.
11. The British Journal of Photography, 3 August 1883, p. 1149.
12. The Amateur Photographer, 22 February 1901, p. 155.
13. The British Journal of Photography, 19 February 1904, p. 144. It is worth noting that the suggestion for increasing the lifelike appearance of the corpse was to inject a few drops of glycerine into the eyes with a syringe. The effect was said to be astonishing: “The lids open wide and remain so.” Also, the lips were colored with carmine: “The transformation of appearance is then complete, and the photograph of the corpse will resemble that of the living person.” It is also worth mentioning that the Frenchman who proposed this technique was Bertillon, an expert police scientist who had a special interest in criminal identification. Perhaps in deference to his authority, nine months later, the journal which initially dismissed his suggestion as absurd, reiterated the technique and commented on its usefulness (4 November 1904, p. 941).
14. The Amateur Photographer, 24 July 1891, p. 68.