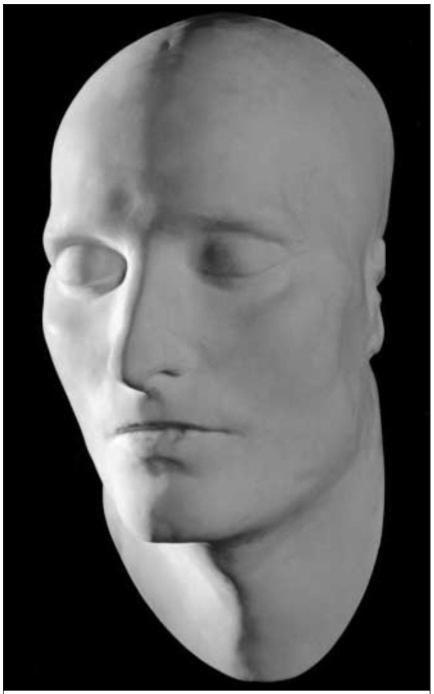
Lifeworks

Picturing the dead

Attention! Des images peuvent heurter votre sensibilité. [Warning! You may find some images shocking.] This caution greets visitors entering *Le dernier portrait*, an exhibition of images of individuals in death, installed at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris from March 5 to May 26. Although the practice of making death masks, which arose in the Middle Ages, was initially reserved for royalty, by the 18th and 19th centuries it was extended to include a broader range of political and intellectual figures. As soon as the esteemed person expired, an artist would be summoned to his (sometimes her) death bed, and would set to work, building up layers of plaster on the corpse's face to create a mould from which to cast a solid image in wax or plaster. The realism of the resulting effigy was often enhanced by the artist, who might alter the closed eyelids of the death mask to look like gazing eyes; at the same time, "real" traces of the body — such as eyelashes trapped in the plaster mould — would be removed. Even as death masks were strangely lifelike, they were also clearly distinguished from human flesh. Replacing the decaying body with more permanent materials, masks worked to preserve and celebrate death itself.

After 1840 the process of reproducing death changed, and light was used more often than plaster to trace the features of dead bodies. The growing prominence of photography allowed all classes to commission portraits of deceased relatives. The exhibition included numerous daguerreotypes of elderly people carefully laid out on their funeral biers. There were even more images, however, of dead infants and toddlers, lovingly dressed and photographed for posterity. Although some of the children were shown simply lying on their beds, others were carefully posed with dolls or personal belongings. One picture taken by an unknown American photographer was particularly haunting: a young girl had been propped up and made to hold drumsticks. In a small, hand-coloured daguerreotype framed in velvet, the little girl played with her favourite toy, even in death.



©Patrice Schmidt, Musée d'Orsay

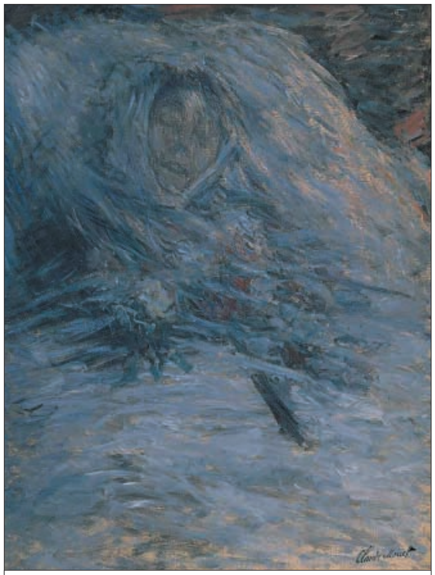
Francesco Antommarchi (1821). *Death mask of Napoleon I.* Plaster, 19 cm × 33 cm × 16 cm

©Sara Cleary Burns and The Burns Archive, New York, NY

Cecil Carey (*c.* 1920). *Hands.* Gelatin silver print, 10.9 cm × 15.2 cm

These family keepsakes may strike contemporary viewers as odd and perhaps even grotesque. Producing and circulating pictures of dead relatives or famous people is no longer an acceptable, everyday practice, even as there is a fascination with dead bodies in films and on television. When photographs appear at funerals today, they are more likely to replace the corpse than to image it. Typically placed atop a closed casket, modern pictures feature the deceased individual in life, often at a younger age or before illness struck. This apparent disavowal of the human corpse can be at least partly related to what French literary critic Julia Kristeva calls the abject status of dead bodies. Existing between stable categories, corpses are neither truly human nor nonhuman, neither complete individuals nor mere fleshly matter. What *Le dernier portrait* reveals, however, is that the current discomfort that many people now experience at the sight of a lifeless body is relatively recent. In the not-so-distant past in the Western world, death was understood as a final, restful sleep. Dying was something that could be done well, even beautifully (*la belle morte*). Death could also be linked with erotic fantasy — perhaps something that has not changed as much in the popular imagination. The installation in Paris featured, for example, the death mask of an unknown woman found drowned in the Seine (*L'inconnue de la Seine*). The beautiful face and enigmatic smile of this woman inspired many stories at the end of the 19th century — myths projected onto a passive and available female body.

Despite the exhibition's focus on past approaches to death, current beliefs rose to the surface in *Le dernier portrait*. The labels accompanying each work often ressembled death certificates, listing the age and cause of death of the individual portrayed. Beneath the death mask of the 19th-century painter Théodore Géricault, for example, a curt text explained that he died Jan. 26, 1824, at the age of 33, from an abscess on his spinal column caused by a fall from a horse. This medical explanation was strangely at odds with the cult status the mask once had. Clearly, modern viewers see images of death in a different light, as documents that provide information rather than venerable monuments to the dead. Pointing to our current beliefs, the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay demonstrated that death was not always approached as a medical event. In the past, death could be glorified and pondered, rather than recorded, measured and explained. Despite the curator's fears, *Le dernier portrait* was not shocking or upsetting. Instead it showed that death was once an important, mysterious and even remarkable event, one worth remembering.


©ADAGP / Photo RMN / Ch. Jean

Claude Monet (1879). *Camille on her deathbed.* Oil on canvas, 90 cm × 68 cm

Lianne McTavish
Ms. McTavish is an associate professor of visual culture at the University of New Brunswick and specializes in the history of early modern French art and medicine.

Ilness and metaphor

Modern reproduction

"Bokanovsky's Process," repeated the Director, and the students underlined the words in their little note-books.

One egg, one embryo, one adult — normality. But a bokanoskified egg will bud, will proliferate, will divide. From eight to ninety-six buds, and every bud will grow into a perfectly formed embryo, and every embryo into a full-sized adult. Making ninety-six human beings grow where only one grew before. Progress.

"Essentially," the D.H.C. concluded, "bokanovskification consists of a series of arrests of development. We check the normal growth and, paradoxically enough, the egg responds by budding."

Responds by budding. The pencils were busy.

He pointed. On a very slowly moving band a rackful of test-tubes was entering a large metal box, another rackful was emerging. Machinery faintly purred. It took eight minutes for the tubes to go through, he told them. Eight minutes of hard X-rays being about as much as an egg can stand. A few died; of the rest, the least susceptible divided into two; most put out four buds; some eight; all were returned to the incubators, where the buds began to develop; then, after two days, were suddenly chilled, chilled and checked. Two, four, eight, the buds in their turn budded; and having budded were dosed almost to death with alcohol; consequently burgeoned again and having budded — bud out of bud out of bud — were thereafter — further arrest being generally fatal — left to develop in peace. By which time the original egg was in a fair way to becoming anything from eight to ninety-six embryos — a prodigious improvement, you will agree, on nature. Identical twins — but not in piddling twos and threes as in the old viviparous days, when an egg would sometimes accidentally divide; actually by dozens, by scores at a time.

"Scores," the Director repeated and flung out his arms, as though he were distributing largesse. "Scores."

But one of the students was fool enough to ask where the advantage lay.

"My good boy!" The Director wheeled sharply round on him. "Can't you see? Can't you *see*?" He raised a hand; his expression was solemn. "Bokanovsky's Process is one of the major instruments of social stability!"

From Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London, 1932), ch 1.