

ple 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 resembled 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 shock-

ing or upsetting. Instead it showed that death was once an important, mysterious and even remarkable event, one worth remembering.

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Illness 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.



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