



Memento Mori: The Birth & Resurrection of Postmortem Photography



Photograph courtesy of The Burns Archive

Through November 29, in collaboration with The Burns Archive (recognized as the most important private collection of early photography), the Merchant's House Museum is presenting an exhibition tracing the evolution and continuing iconography of postmortem photography. The show will feature more than 140 items from The Burns Archive collection never before shown in New York City, as well as modern art inspired by the iconography of historic postmortem photographs.

The introduction of photography in the 1840s transformed memorial portraiture — previously confined to public figures or those wealthy enough to commission an artist. Photographs allowed families of virtually every social class to create pictures of their

loved ones, in life and after death.

Until Kodak's 1888 box camera paved the way for amateur home photography, many people never had a likeness taken before they died, particularly children. Their families, desperate to have any picture of them, turned to postmortem photography.

“In modern Western culture, to have no photograph or visual representation at all is not to have existed.” — Dr. Stanley Burns

Demand for postmortem photographs began to wane by the early 20th century. Americans became more focused on achievements in this lifetime instead of the next, while advances in medical technology removed death from the home, placing the burden on professionals. At the same time, the spread of photography meant that more people were being photographed while alive and healthy.

In the soon-to-be released book, *Sleeping Beauty III Memorial Photography: The Children*, Dr. Stanley Burns of The Burns Archive addresses the history of these often haunting images, as well as the resurgent use of memorial photography in contemporary life. Dr. Burns will give a reading from his book at the Merchant's House Museum on November 17, 2010.

With Tremendous Thanks to
Frank E. Campbell
The Funeral Chapel
For Their Generous Support
of This Exhibition.



Historic Furnishings Plan: Ground Floor is First Up

Here are some of the dramatic changes we will be making to return the House to its mid-1850s self:

The Kitchen Fireplace Brick Will Be Painted—a Deep Plum Brown

Our recent paint analysis has made it possible to determine more accurately the colors of the walls and ceilings throughout the house. We have discovered that the brick over the fireplace in the kitchen, which is currently exposed, was painted a dark plum brown color in the 1850s.

A surprise, but logical when you think about it. Smoke from the wood-burning beehive oven, the coal-burning stove, oil lamps and gas lighting would have inevitably found its way to the brick. A dark color finish would have helped conceal the smoke stains.

An Orphan Kitchen Door Will Be Restored to Its Rightful Place

When the Tredwells were in residence, a pass-through pantry between the kitchen and family room provided a storage space for food staples and a passage to enable servants to move back and forth between the rooms when serving meals.

In 1936, prior to opening the house as a museum, the pass-through was converted to restrooms, and the kitchen door that had formerly provided access was removed. An entrance to the restroom was provided in the hall, and the kitchen wall plastered over where the pass-through door once hung.

Continued on page 2 . . .

MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM

The Merchant's House Museum is New York City's only family home preserved intact — inside and out — from the 19th century. A National Historic and New York City Landmark, the House was built in 1832 and was home to a prosperous merchant family for 100 years.

Board of Directors

Anthony Bello, Helen Michalis Bonebrake
Earl Crittenden, Jr., Franny Eberhart,
Anne Fairfax, Margaret Halsey Gardiner,
Merrikey S. Hall, Scott Heyl, Joseph Pell
Lombardi, Elizabeth Lugar, Deborah
Spaeder McWilliams, Nicholas B. A.
Nicholson, John E. Oden, Kate Burns
Ottavino, Richard Franklin Sammons
William Sofield

Advisory Council

Frank Andrews, John Dobkin, John Guare
Tiziana and Hugh Hardy, Charles Lockwood
Nicholas Quennell, Stan Ries, Frank
Sanchis, Anthony C. Wood

Staff

Margaret Halsey Gardiner,
Executive Director

Mary Knapp
Museum Historian

Eva Ann Ulz
Education & Communications Manager

Caroline Drabik
Collections Manager

Roberta Belulovich
Visitor Services

John Rommel
Head Gardener

And Many Volunteers & Interns

Follow Us Online



www.merchantshouse.org

Visit the Museum

Hours Thursday through Monday,
12 to 5 p.m., self-guided tours

Groups by appointment
Admission Members Free

Adults \$8, Students & Seniors \$5

29 East Fourth Street, NYC 10003
Tel 212-777-1089 Fax 212-777-1104

*The Merchant's House Museum is owned
by the City of New York, operated by
Old Merchants House of New York, Inc.,
and is a member of the Historic House Trust.*

continued from page 1.

The defunct kitchen door to the pass-through was stored in a corner of the cellar, where it has remained for over 75 years. When reinstalled, this door will not be functional (we are not getting rid of the restroom), but it will restore the kitchen wall to its mid-19th century appearance and give a better sense of how the room was used. That's our goal—to present the House as near as possible to the way it was then.

And an Original Gas Pipe Will Get a Period Fixture

The only source of gas lighting in the kitchen during the 19th century was a single wall bracket on the east wall between the two doors leading to the hall. The remnant of the original exposed gas pipe running along the ceiling still remains and has been capped.

We will replace the missing gas pipe that ran down the wall with a period gas bracket, burner and globe.

Family Room Windows Will Wear a "New Old" Look

We don't know exactly how the Tredwells chose to cover the family room windows, but period sources overwhelmingly attest to the popularity of roller blinds combined with half

curtains as well as a primary window drapery. And, as further evidence, we have two original wood rollers in our collection.

Reproduction linen blinds will be ordered and half curtains of muslin and a decorative drapery fabricated. The color will be in keeping with the neutral paint palette that the Tredwells used throughout the house.

And Here's What's Underfoot

In the kitchen, we will put down an easy-to-clean oil cloth in a solid color—which was typically used on the floors of high-traffic areas and kitchens in the 19th century. In the family room, our goal is to recycle a reproduction 1840s bedroom carpet (just as the Tredwells might have done). We are investigating the possibility of having that carpet reconfigured for the family room space.

Of Course, We Welcome (Need) Your Support

We are delighted to report that Benjamin Moore will donate all the paint and the decorative glazes for the family room, original kitchen, and hallway. Nonetheless, this project is estimated to cost \$55,000. Your donations, large or small, will go a long way in allowing us to undertake this project.

A Landmark Anniversary

September 21, 2010, marked the 45th anniversary of the initial hearing of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. It was on that date in 1965 that the Merchant's House and 19 other buildings were designated as the first landmarks in New York City.

And no wonder. The house is a miracle of survival – a perfect example of Greek revival domestic architecture that retains the original possessions of the single family that occupied it for almost 100 years. It is a truly uniquely authentic window through which to view the past. In case you've forgotten.

From the Commission's press release:

"Accompanying rapid urban growth is the danger that the structures which played a vital part of our colorful history will be leveled to make way for progress. In New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner has taken steps to prevent this. In June he appointed eleven prominent citizens to the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Their first order of business was to single out 28 structures in immediate danger of being demolished. These include the Old Merchant's House, the Salmagundi Club, the Astor Library, and the Friends Meeting House."

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Unless otherwise noted, reservations and prepayment are required. Call 212-777-1089 or email nyc1832@merchantshouse.org.

Through Monday, November 29

Exhibition: "Memento Mori:" The Birth & Resurrection of Postmortem Photography

In collaboration with the Burns Archive & featuring artists Joel-Peter Witkin, Sally Mann, Hal Hirshorn, Marian St. Laurent, & Sarah Lohman. Trace the evolution of postmortem photography in America as well as modern art inspired by the iconography of these historic images. With thanks to Frank E. Campbell, the Funeral Chapel, for their generous support of this exhibition. *Included with regular admission. Reservations not required.*

October 22, 23, 28, 29, & 30, Tours begin every half hour from 6 to 10 p.m.

Candlelight Ghost Tours of "Manhattan's Most Haunted House"

Come see the house *The New York Times* called "Manhattan's Most Haunted" by flickering candlelight – complete with eerie scenes of mid-19th century death and mourning. You'll find out what paranormal investigations have uncovered and hear about strange and inexplicable occurrences from people who actually experienced them. *\$25, MHM Members \$13. Call early, this event sells out!*

Sunday, October 24, 3 to 5 p.m.

From Parlor to Grave: 1865 Funeral Reenactment

The parlors will be draped in black crape as we recreate the 1865 funeral of Seabury Tredwell. After the service, mourners are invited to follow the coffin to nearby New York City Marble Cemetery – rarely open to the public – for a tour. 19th-century mourning attire encouraged; black crape armbands will be provided. *\$20, MHM Members \$10. Call early, this event sells out!*

Sunday, October 31, Performances at 7 & 9 p.m.



Funeral Reenactment 2006, Photo by Gardiner Anderson

Spine Tingling & True: Ghost Stories of the Merchant's House

Official Museum ghost-storyteller, Anthony Bellov, will read selections from 19th-century horror classics, and recount highlights from his ongoing research into the strange and supernatural occurrences at the Merchant's House Museum – in a parlor arranged for a mid-19th century funeral.

\$25, MHM Members \$15. Call early, this event sells out!

Wednesday, November 17, 7 p.m.

Reading: *Sleeping Beauty III Memorial Photography: The Children*

Dr. Stanley Burns of The Burns Archive will speak about the practice of postmortem photography from the 19th century until today, and sign copies of his latest book in the renowned *Sleeping Beauty* series. A reception to meet the author will follow. *Free, space is limited.*

The Turn of the Screw: Return Engagement

Presented by Two Turns Theatre Co.
& Merchant's House Museum

After a highly acclaimed, sold-out run last February, we're pleased to announce that Two Turns Theatre Company is bringing their production of *The Turn of the Screw* back to the Museum's double parlors for two weeks this November.

Adapted by Jeffrey Hatcher from Henry James's 1898 gothic novella, the two-actor production – originally designed to be performed in a black box theater – plays perfectly against the authentic mid-19th century backdrop provided by the Merchant's House Museum's Greek Revival double parlors. Historically inspired lighting, including flickering candles, will add the final touch to the eerie atmosphere – capturing James's original conceit in the introduction of *The Turn of the Screw*: a ghost story told round the fireplace on a chill winter's evening.

The production will feature Vince Gatton and Christina LaFortune reprising their roles as The Man and The Woman.

November 11-14 & 18-21

Performances at 7 p.m. & 9 p.m.

The Turn of the Screw

Adapted by Jeffrey Hatcher from Henry James's classic ghost story and performed in the Museum's Greek Revival double parlors.

\$30, tickets at www.twoturns.com.



The Museum's educational programs are supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.