

TOP Collection: The Illumination of Life by Death

Memento mori & Photography

Jun. 17—Sep. 25, 2022 | 2F Exhibition Gallery



Mario Giacomelli, From the series *Death will come and will have your eyes*, c.1954-1968, Gelatin silver print, Collection of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, Courtesy Archivio Mario Giacomelli ©Rita e Simone Giacomelli

The TOP Collection exhibition features masterpieces from the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum's collection of over 36,000 works.*

This year's exhibition on the theme of memento mori presents around 150 photographs and related works that probe how people have lived resiliently in the face of death, seeding our imagination for how to move forward through difficult times.

"Memento mori," a Latin phrase meaning "remember that you will die," was meant as a reminder that people's daily lives unfolded in the shadow of death. As the plague ravaged the medieval Christian world between the 14th and 17th centuries, this trope became associated with images of the "dance of death" showing skeletons and humans dancing, and was widely depicted as part of paintings, music, and other works of art. Photography, as well, has often been described by critics as a medium that evokes death.

This exhibition reconsiders the intimate relationship between memento mori and photography through prints depicting death and photographs by Eugène Atget, W. Eugene Smith, Robert Frank, Mario Giacomelli, and others spanning from the 19th century to the present.

*As of March 2022

Memento mori

The Latin phrase “memento mori,” which means “remember that you will die,” was a trope used in the Christian world as a reminder that everyday life unfolded in the shadow of death. As the plague ravaged medieval society, the phrase spread widely in association with images of death depicting skeletons and humans dancing. Its popularity reflected the way that people enduring hardships including epidemics, wars, and famine not only harbored fear of ever-present death, but tried to find positive meaning in life by recognizing that we are all destined to die eventually.

Exhibition Highlights

1| Photography captures what it means to be alive, illuminating the everyday

This exhibition focusing on memento mori explores photographic expression from the 19th century to the present to probe how people have shown resilience in life while also facing death.

We might think of photographic techniques, which use light-sensitive materials to freeze an image and capture a single moment, as expressing our existence within fragile and ever-changing time. Whereas people in medieval times drew positive meaning in life from images of death, recognizing the memento mori that underlies photographic expression may allow us to see what it means to be alive in our modern age. This exhibition also focuses on the unique manner in which photography fixes time, memory, and human emotions in a single image. Perhaps we might uncover insights on how to move forward through life in an era of global turmoil.

2| TOP Collection features a lineup of important artists from Japan and abroad

The Tokyo Photographic Art Museum has assembled a broad and comprehensive collection of works by Japanese and international artists important to the history of photography, with an emphasis on leading Japanese artists. This exhibition features well-known works and hidden gems by W. Eugene Smith, Robert Capa, and Kyōichi Sawada, who are representative of photojournalism; Eugène Atget, who documented the changing streets of Paris as it underwent modernization; Mario Giacomelli, who observed the lives of people in hospice care; and others from the TOP collection of 36,899 works.*

Visitors can look forward to new encounters with photographic works that offer a variety of perspectives on the exhibition theme of memento mori.

*As of March 2022

3| Memento mori's emergence and Hans Holbein the Younger's "Images of Death"

The exhibition's introduction features the celebrated "Images of Death" of Hans Holbein the Younger (National Museum of Western Art collection). This is a rare opportunity to see these prints in Japan after the pandemic, some 500 years since they caused a sensation around the world for probing what it means to be alive.

Featured artists

Hans Holbein the Younger

Mario Giacomelli

Robert Capa

Kyoichi Sawada

Sebastião Salgado

Walker Evans

W. Eugene Smith

Lee Friedlander

Robert Frank

Shigeo Gocho

William Eggleston

Diane Arbus

Nobuyoshi Araki

Eugène Atget

Josef Sudek

Ichiro Kojima

Shomei Tōmatsu

Fujiwara Shinya



3-00 |

Shinya Fujiwara, *The heart chooses at the time of death, whether to be wondering in darkness or filled with light.*, From the series of *Memento-Mori*, 1972, Chromogenic print, Collection of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum

WORKS

Total: 149

Photo works: 124, Prints: 25

Exhibition composition

Introduction: Memento mori and the “Dance of Death”

Section 1: Memento mori and photography

Section 2: Memento mori, Solitude and Humor

Section 3: Memento mori and happiness

Introduction: Memento mori and the “Dance of Death”

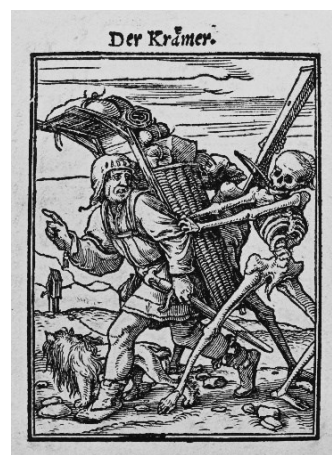
The origins of memento mori are explored in the context of medieval times.



0-01 <Images of Death>: The Richman



0-02 <Images of Death>: The Old Man



0-03 <Images of Death>: The Pedlar

0-01, 02, 03 Hans Holbein the Younger, <Images of Death>, 1523-26, Woodcut, Collection of The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

Section 1: Memento mori and photography

Numerous critics have remarked that photography is a medium that evokes death.

The first part of the exhibition features works that reflect the relationship between memento mori and photography, drawing on the writings of French philosopher Roland Barthes, American critic Susan Sontag, and others.



1-01



1-02



1-03

1-01 | Robert Capa, *Near Fraga (Aragon)*, November 7, 1938. *Loyalist offensive along the Rio Se*, 1938, Gelatin silver print, Collection of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum

1-02 | W. Eugene SMITH, From the series of *NEW MEXICO*, 1947, Gelatin silver print, Collection of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum

1-03 | Mario Giacomelli, From the series *Death will come and will have your eyes*, c. 1954-1968, Gelatin silver print, Collection of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum,
Courtesy Archivio Mario Giacomelli, ©Rita e Simone Giacomelli

Section 2: Memento mori, Solitude and Humor

Whereas some people confront death directly through unavoidable hardships such as war, famine, and disease, others feel a closeness to death despite not encountering such hardships directly. Perhaps this is especially true for those who have left their native lands in search of new livelihoods and feel solitude when separated from their spiritual homes. This part focuses on the relationship of memento mori and the loneliness that lurks in people's hearts.



2-01 | Nobuyoshi Araki, From the series of *Sentimental Journey*, 1971, Gelatin silver print, Collection of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum
©Nobuyoshi Araki

Section 3: Memento mori and happiness

In our daily lives, we become absorbed in the visible world, but facing our destiny of death may allow us to reconsider life and find peace of mind. The final part considers how artworks induce an emotional response in viewers, looking at photographic works that let us contemplate death.



3-01



3-02

3-01 |

Josef Sudek, *View of the nave and down - south side of the new part of St. Vitus Cathedral*,
From the series of *St. Vitus*, 1928, Gelatin silver print, Collection of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum

3-02 |

Eugene Atget, *Cloître des Billettes, Archives Street*, 1898, Albumen print, Collection of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum

OUTLINE

Title | TOP Collection: The Illumination of Life by Death—Memento mori & Photography

Date | Jun. 17—Sep. 25, 2022

Closed | Mondays (except when Monday falls on a holiday, in which case the museum is open and closed the following day.)

Open Hours | 10:00–18:00 (20:00 on Thursdays and Fridays). Last entry 30 minutes before closing.

Admission | Adults ¥ 700 / College Students ¥ 560 / High School and Junior High School Students, Over 65 ¥ 350.

* Admission is free for grade school children or younger; junior high school students living or attending schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area, holders of Japan's disability identification cards (shogaisha techo) together with two caregiver, and holders of the museum's annual passport.

Venue | Tokyo Photographic Art Museum 2F Exhibition Gallery

Organized by Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Tokyo Photographic Art Museum operated by Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture

For Press

If you have any press enquiries about this Exhibition, please contact our Department of Public Relations.

High-resolution images for publication are also available by e-mail. press-info@topmuseum.jp

*Captions and credits should also be displayed when publishing images.

*Please refrain from using images without permission. Moreover, trimming, text overlays, and other processing is not allowed.

* The schedule is subject to change. Any further changes will be announced.

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