

Amelia Cusanno

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Death Death Revolution: An Brief Introduction to Modern Embalming

The art of preserving the human body postmortem has existed for centuries, with the most obvious example being the mummification process of Ancient Egypt. Initially, preservation served spiritual and political purposes— and depending on the dominant culture or religion —was often reserved for those of high status such as nobility or saints, or was intended to help the soul transition into the afterlife. Nowadays in North America and much of Western Europe, embalming the deceased has become incredibly popular and is among one of the most common funerary practices. However, embalming with the aim of creating a very lifelike effect is a relatively new concept, and as with many shifts in Western death culture, the Victorians are responsible for this new era in science and grieving.

France is often pointed at as the epicenter for this change. According to *Embalming and the Materiality of Death (France, Nineteenth Century)* by Anne Carol, prior to the French Revolution, primarily nobility and major religious figures were preserved for the sake of allowing citizens to visit and revere these so-called “great men,” but the technique remained very similar to that of mummification. The brain and eyes were removed, cavities were filled with aromatic herbs and powders, outer flesh was rubbed with balm, and finally the body was wrapped in bandages before being sealed in a coffin (Carol 184). Since the body itself would not be seen directly, the primary goal was to prevent total decay and disappearance rather than completely recreate the appearance of the individual as they had looked in life.

By the end of the 1700s and the start of the 1800s, mostly due to the French Revolution, the act of embalming remained far too expensive and complex to be accessed by the general

public, but nobility and religious figures were no longer the only ones allowed to undergo the treatment. Soldiers, officers, and senators were frequently embalmed, and over time, wealthy bourgeoisie families began making private requests to have their loved ones preserved as well (Carol 184). Around this time, two major issues arose that created the need for better embalming techniques: Most prominently, the scientific community was in need of bodies that could be easily transported to and displayed in amphitheaters for the training of new physicians and surgeons. The second reason was far more personal to the average French citizen, as the child mortality rate was starting to decline and people found it increasingly unfair to see loved ones die so young (Carol 185). Therefore, the bodies had to undergo as little mutilation as possible, and reconstructed to appear more lifelike.

Various physicians of the era began rapidly experimenting and developing new techniques, testing smaller, more discrete incisions and prolonged immersions in chemicals. Jean-Nicholas Gannal is credited as the “father of modern embalming,” since he is partially responsible for the creation of arterial embalming and held a strong monopoly over the practice for years (Carol 185). He was a notorious businessman in many regards, and he condemned anyone who dared use older techniques while refusing to let anyone implement his specific methods. By playing off the growing fascination with Egyptian tombs and memento mori, and by promoting the idea that embalming the dead was a “moral obligation,” he successfully built a lucrative business (Carol 185-187). Many of his contemporaries were outraged by his practices, and brought him to court under the claim that since this was a discovery intended to benefit the scientific community as a whole, his findings and methods should be shared publicly. Gannal lost the court battle, and the funeral industry began booming across France. So while embalming does serve a practical purpose, allowing the easier transportation and viewing of bodies as well

as preventing the potential spread of disease from contact with a corpse, many of the cultural and moral ties to the practice were fabricated by doctors and businessmen of the era (Carol 187).

Eventually, Gannal's work was published in English and subsequently spread to the United States, followed by publications by Jaques Maretté who introduced his own new embalming techniques to England. It is also around this time that embalming actually suffered a decline in popularity back in France, as laws and restrictions were beginning to take hold, creating industry standards and preventing uncertified individuals from entering the business (Carol 189). Before the widespread introduction of embalming in not only France, but England and the States as well, women were most often in charge of the cleaning, dressing, and preparation of a body, while male undertakers had the job of transporting and burying the corpse. Except with the blossoming of the funeral industry, women were pushed aside as men from a range of occupations— from undertakers, to physicians, to surgeons, to miscellaneous businessmen with no medical experience —began advertising their embalming services. Since the lack of standardization led to subpar embalming results, the French government created stricter regulations (Trompette and Lemonnier 16).

Meanwhile, embalming caused the funeral industry in the United States to boom. 18th century colonization followed by the American Civil War left families scattered and unable to hold prompt funerals. *Funeral Embalming: The Transformation of a Medical Innovation* by Pascale Trompette and Mélanie Lemonnier states that, “For the dead soldier, embalming and restorative art preserved the bodies for the long journey home and enabled the family to take a last look at their lost loved ones” (Trompette and Lemonnier 14-15). Dr. Thomas Holmes, a former coroner's physician from the time, began further experimenting with various chemicals and techniques, and promoted the practice of embalming to families grieving those killed in

battle. He also trained the first official generation of American embalming surgeons, further creating a distinction between surgeons and undertakers (Trompette and Lemonnier 14-15). As partnerships between physicians, surgeons, undertakers, and businessmen developed, instructors began offering degrees and courses on the subject of embalming, leading to the creation of the first American mortuary schools (Trompette and Lemonnier 15).

Arterial embalming, as a result, evolved into an intricate system that required detailed knowledge of anatomy and the necessary tools used in the process. By inserting an aneurysm hook into an artery, blood was removed from the soft organs, circulatory system, and body cavities. The injection of preserving and disinfecting chemicals helped displace the blood, which would then be ejected through a drain inserted into a corresponding vein. Through the use of an aspirator and a trocar, which were powered by either hand-operated bulb syringes or vacuum pumps, gasses and bodily fluids were removed from cavities and organs (University of Michigan, "*So Once Were We*": *Death in Early America*). After the body was preserved and cleaned, the outward appearance would be reconstructed using wax, powders, paints, and shaving equipment, with wires and screws securing the mouth and eyes shut.

By the 1870s, embalming had gained immense traction, leading to the publication of manuals such as Auguste Renouard's 1878 *The Undertaker's Manual* and two editions of a manual by J. H. Clarke, who included advertisements for his line of embalming and disinfecting fluid, tools, and supplies (University of Michigan, "*So Once Were We*": *Death in Early America*). Even magazines—*The Casket*, *Sunnyside*, and *Embalmer's Monthly* to name a few—circulated at this time, promoting educational opportunities, equipment, and news about the growing industry (University of Michigan, "*So Once Were We*": *Death in Early America*).

The industry experienced another interesting shift at this time. As previously mentioned, women did the majority postmortem care, but this care also occurred in the former residence of the deceased. Even after male embalmers took over the role of preparing the body, much of the work could still happen in the home, so the majority of equipment was portable between the funeral salons and residences (University of Michigan, *“So Once Were We”*: *Death in Early America*). However, after the introduction of formaldehyde in the 1890s and early 1900s, funeral parlors became more necessary for the safety of both families and embalmers. Cold storage rooms took up immense space since they needed to hold multiple bodies at once, as more and more people were spending their final days in hospitals rather than at home (Trompette and Lemonnier 17). Furthermore, formaldehyde and other common preserving and disinfecting chemicals were, and still are, highly dangerous to work with, and require very specific training, ventilation, and storage.

Embalming has experienced a rapid, vast evolution since the 1800s, leading to incredible scientific discoveries and a drastic change in Western death culture. Today, aside from cremation, embalming is still one of the most common ways of preparing a body for a funeral, but those are far from the only methods accessible to the public. Information about more eco-friendly burials, such as aquamations (the submersion of a body into a mix of water and a strong alkali) or the freezing of a body during viewings, have spread over the years, and is available to those who can afford it and desire that method. However, embalming is deeply ingrained in American culture, as the result of businessmen creating a new narrative around the moral and social implications of the practice, and the fear many people reasonably hold about never being able to see their loved ones a final time.

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