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One could feel a certain closeness at an unfamiliar cemetery when the unknown deceased are depicted in their portraits, thanks to the old photo porcelain technology. The inscriptions may have become weathered and close to illegible, but the long ago deceased look at us with serenity. The dignity of these old black and white photographs is missing in the more recent pictures on the graves entirely – instead, a contrived expression of party and leisure life is evoked.

Oliver Schuster

After the End of all Days

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At the Cemetery in Stresa, Lago Maggiore

The names of recently deceased are posted at the entrance to the cemetery. The Association of Motor Boaters mourns for Giorgio even twice..

After the End of all Days

What remains after
many years – grave
pictures at the cemetery
of Stresa (VB)



Dr. Giuseppe Sirtori
8.6.1879 – 3.9.1945
practised as Physician
in Stresa for 25 years

I was irresistibly drawn to the shot of a couple during my first walk through the cemetery of Stresa which overlooks Lake Maggiore. It shows Comm. Dr. Giuseppe Sirtori, a medical doctor for 25 years in the community, together with his wife obviously, in those days .

After more than half a century later the photo still emits a signal of deep affection for each other, and a gentle openness to others so that probably anybody would want to have met the couple during their life time.

The wife has linked her arm to the doctor's, she wears her handbag loosely on the other arm. Both are gently stepping in direction of the camera. The vivid picture appears to be a snapshot. Hard to imagine that the photographer tried to stage a walk towards him. Who was the photographer and what equipment did he have to accomplish a photo of such intensity? Maybe he had a small camera like a Leica by Ernst Leitz Wetzlar or a Contax by Zeiss Ikon Dresden.

The doctor seems hunched over a bit due to old age. The picture may have been recorded shortly before his death Dr Sirtori died shortly after completion of the 66th year of his life. Italy entered World War II as Germany's ally and ended up in May 1945 on the side of the Allies. This was also the time when Dottore Sirtori cared for the patients of Stresa. Who had come during those fateful years to him? Whom could he help and who was sent away? What role played his wife in the doctor's household? I could not determine when Mrs Sirtori died, for she was not mentioned anywhere in the area. I would have liked to know more about the

Sirtori family, but almost 70 years later, it would be hard to find a cemetery visitor who may remember them and there was no one available; the place was deserted.

The lonesome Cemetery

A few days later I returned to the cemetery to take pictures. Impressive, high arcades protect the columbaria, with plates of inscriptions in



Dr. Sirtori and his wife, presumably in 1945

front of urns high up to the ceiling. The exterior of the columbaria form a wall around the cemetery. By movable ladders, which first I had considered an equipment of ongoing renovation, relatives climb to the higher mounted plates to attach plastic flowers or switch on electric candles in front of the inscription.

In addition to the urn areas under the arcades, individual grave sites can be found on several levels. Some larger elaborated family grave sites are located on the highest terrace.

There are some mausoleums, too. All places of commemoration have in

common the lush bouquets of plastic flowers, all of similar shape and colour. Only a few places were planted with living grave decoration by the bereaved. That seems to indicate that nowadays there is no need for people caring anymore for the graves. Plastics from China serve as a token of commemoration without need of further care. Just a single watering can hung on the top of the fountain. During the three hours I spent there,

There is a vignette with the double portrait of a couple in casual clothes. The wife has put back her hair in a simple fashion, her husband shows a full moustache, very peppy. Perhaps the couple's snapshot then later served as a picture at the grave?

The persons portrayed on older porcelain photographs seem to be aware how special the occasion of taking it was; they are dressed decently and look thoughtful. In sharp



Flowers waste to last



I met only one man who was watering his father's grave.

While I strolled through the cemetery I compared birth and death dates with the photos on the often quite weathered stone slabs. An old, well preserved porcelain picture with the data 1861 1926, is decorated with fresh roses see page 4, top right .

contrast, today's digital photos are barely random party products such as an image of the year 1998, featuring a young Kevin, who died with 18 years see page 6 . He grins with his mouth wide open from his grave site and an application on his sweat shirt shows a beer glass with a smiling face of foam and the words »Guinness as usual« ○

The columbaria

The urns are stored at rear wall of the arcades. Far right stands the mausoleum of the family Moise. On the terrace in front are the graves.



ANTONIO
GATTO
★ 1924 † 2007



Old versus New: Pictorial Language in Death



Grave picture at Stresa, circa 1888

Italy, or rather its predecessor states, had a variety of sepulchral culture. Sarcophagi, urns, or the bare bones were placed in vaults and grave chambers. The dead got buried in above the ground charnel houses, chapels, or they were placed in graves with magnificent monuments. Many of urns at Stresa's cemetery date from the early 20th Century, although only in 1987 in, a law was passed that the cremation in Italy is free of charge as a public service. To my estimation there are four times more urns in columbaria than graves. The graves were, in my observation recently done, about from 1970 on.

Both forms of burial seem to require for a picture of the dead. Previously, the portraits were artfully crafted and produced with diligence. Several times I paused in front of old but well preserved black and



white photos, and felt touched with a flash of »MEMENTO MORI« see left .

How shallow then are the every days' pictures of the more recently deceased, ranging from Manhattan's skyline in the background to large pat-

terned Aloha shirt in the foreground see page 5 . The choice which the bereaved have taken from the digital mass media seems to be out of place, neglecting the respect for the death.

Do such »Party« pictures make any sense at all? It might very well be



that the parents of the young Kevin Zanetta with this strange picture in a Guinness sweat shirt wanted to warn his buddies of the deadly consequences of heavy drinking ○

Impressum



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