

Memento Mori in Art and Literature

Until recently, memento mori has received surprisingly limited critical attention relative to its cultural importance in art history, literature, and beyond. Even though memento mori artifacts and references to memento mori are ubiquitous, few comprehensive sources exist in the English-language scholarly literature. More precisely, memento mori has received, relatively speaking, surprisingly limited critical attention in a *sustained* manner. Related to memento mori, but distinct in emphasis, is Cheney's work (1992). Hallam and Hockey (2001) give memento mori some minor explicit attention. No readily available European-language source that I am aware of offers a complete treatment, though there are some notable sources related to, but distinct from, the present study of memento mori in their emphases and methods (e.g., Schützeichel 1962; Ingen 1966; Haneveld 1995; Pennington 2001; and Warda 2011). The recent stunning photo book by art historian and photographer Paul Koudounaris, *Memento Mori: The Dead Among Us* (2015), makes important first steps toward a more focused and sustained attention on memento mori, but it remains a beginning point.

As far as I know, critical sources outside the West on this theme are minimal at this point in time. One of the few references is Nakagawa's work (1983). Isolated references to memento mori abound in Western and global art history monographs, but then often they are not given a listing as a subject term in the monographs' indices. Memento mori *does* receive more attention in articles, essays, reviews, and museum catalogs especially on particular uses of memento mori in images and artifacts from the medieval period to the present (e.g., Ascher 2004; Bergström 1970; Carretta 1980; King 1981; Napoleone 1998; Vinken 1999). There are also related theses and dissertations (e.g., Solo 1977, Gomes Witek 2012) and exhibition catalogues for shows related to memento mori (cf. Kerssemakers, van Pagée, and Visser 2000). These scholarly or critical works sometimes also appear, on the one hand, as art historical studies related to Dutch and Italian still life paintings, especially vanitas paintings, of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Or, on the other hand, scholarly and critical works come forward as literary studies of poetry, drama, and fiction (e.g., Nord 1975; Doyle 1976; Scholz Williams 1976; Redwine 1977; Waite 1977; Frye 1979; Gentry 1979, 1980, 1981; Garber 1981; Koozin 1984; Spinrad 1984; Kobialka 2010; Louvel 2012). In some places, memento mori themes are reworked in terms of the transience of human life and the metaphysical reality of an afterlife. These

mortality and immortality themes appear widely in many artifacts, including images and texts, in and beyond the West, e.g., in Chinese and Indian works.

At the same time, scholarly and critical literature specifically focused on *memento mori* is just as impressive – in this case, by its relative paucity. This has started to change in recent years as interest in *memento mori* seems to be on the rise. We see this in Koudounaris’s work (2015), and some attention is put upon *memento mori* within the context of early modern Netherlandish art in *The Erotics of Looking*, edited by Angela Vanhaelen and Bronwen Wilson (2013). Yet the relatively limited critical attention is surprising because *memento mori* is a key cultural artifact or phenomenon that appears widely across genres and in many media, but especially, for contemporary culture, in documentaries.

As one looks to Western and global traditions, *memento mori* does indeed appear extensively in art, here discussed in terms of *symbol* and *picture*: for example, in religious images, still life, portraiture, visual quotations, and photography. And *memento mori* appears widely in literature, here discussed as *verbal*, *literary*, and *ideational*: as, for example, picture nomenclature, verbal instruction, and literary reference. *Memento mori* also appears widely in television and film, both fiction and documentary. But documentaries have a particularly special place in culture and contemporary human experience as *memento mori*.

1.1 Memento Mori in Art: As Symbol and as Picture

Describing “*memento mori*” initially is fairly straightforward, though there is some variation in how the term is used.¹ According to Mayer (1991), *memento mori* is “a motif used in art and elsewhere as a reminder of death; from the Latin words meaning, ‘Remember that you must die’. A skull is a common *memento mori*. During the Renaissance a small ornament in the shape of a skull was often carried; it was usually of fine craftsmanship and might be set with gems. In art, a typical *memento mori* is the skull in Albrecht Dürer’s *St. Jerome in His Study* (1514). An entire painting may also be called a *memento mori*” (252). Thus both the skull in the painting and the entire *St. Jerome* picture may be referred to as a *memento mori*.

1 A note on terminology: in this book when *memento mori* is discussed in general or specifically as a cultural phenomenon, then it is discussed in the singular (“*memento mori* is...”). When particular images, artifacts, or items are discussed, then the plural is used (“*memento mori* items are...” or “these *memento mori* [images] are...”) – unless referring to just one of these items (“this [particular] *memento mori* [artifact] is...”).