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Museum prepares to host 'Designs for Death' exhibit

BY C.W. LATTIN

A fascinating exhibit entitled "Designs For Death" will open at 7 p.m. July 26 at the Cobblestone Museum located on Routes 104 and 98.

A preview will precede a 7:30 p.m. slide presentation on zinc grave markers 1874-1914 by Don Hall, an expert on this topic.

Following this program the "Designs For Death" exhibit will open with a reception tendered for all visitors in the Proctor Room of the Cobblestone Church.

The exhibit will remain in place throughout the rest of this year's museum season from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and from 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays till Labor Day and from 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays in September and October, free to

all visitors. Likewise, this is one of the featured displays at the museum from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Old Tyme Day, Aug. 4.

As a collector of antiques, I have always been intrigued with memorial and mourning art even going back to college days. Consequently, over the past 40 years I have occasionally acquired some unique pieced which will now be on display for the first time.

One of the first mourning art objects I acquired was back in the mid 1960s from an antique dealer in Brockport. It is a plaster of paris death mask of Dr. Roswell Park from Buffalo who died in 1914. The dealer I bought this from said she had worked as a receptionist for an old doctor in the Buffalo area back in the 1930s and this was in his office as he had been a

friend of Dr. Park. When the old doctor retired, the receptionist acquired the death mask. Photographs of Dr. Park seem to bear it out.

Another unusual piece in this display will be a small painting by local artist Peter B. West (1837-1913). The painting dated 1886 depicts a dead canary positioned on a book which is entitled "Song Of The Past By Dick." One can assume that the beloved canary died and not having a picture of it when alive, the bereaved owner commissioned West to do a post mortem painting of the bird.

P.B. West enjoyed a fine reputation as a professional animal painter in the Albion area during the last quarter of the 19th century. His paintings were viewed as status symbols among the more well to do.

Along with these unusual items there will also be memorial shadow boxes with funeral wreaths made of either wax flowers, yarn, feathers and even human hair of the deceased.

Victorian mourning prints of a religious nature will be displayed along with photographs of funeral flowers and funeral cards like the one shown here issued by an undertaker.

To also help set this exhibit in the Victorian era, several post mortem photographs will be displayed to show in fact that people were generally laid out at home.

One of the highlights of this exhibit will be a mid-19th century coffin placed on loan from Merrill Grinnell Funeral Homes, Inc. It was used over and over before embalming, as it has an ice tray in the bottom

to keep a corpse cool until the day of burial when it then would have been placed in a regular coffin.

The artifacts and images in this display come to us from a time when people did not live as long and the death rate was much greater, especially of children. "Designs for Death" reflects this all too common occurrence and shows perhaps people's obsession with mourning and memorials as somewhat reflected in the establishment of rural (park like) cemeteries beginning in the second quarter of the 19th century. Death was portrayed as a beautiful everlasting attainment. As one of the mottoes in the exhibit expresses, "Sweet Rest in Heaven," which puts a positive spin on a rather downbeat subject.



DESIGN FOR GOD TO BLESS
This book saved the angel
to be its guardian