

In These Harlem Death Portraits, a Glimpse of the Living

October 17, 2025

By [Walker Mimms](#)

Post-mortem images are as old as photography itself. Some of the most striking and deceptive plates from the Victorian era show deceased children “asleep,” reposed beside a toy or under the gaze of their parents, who sometimes appear holding photos of their child alive.

But for a century or so, with the increase in life expectancy and the rise of senior living facilities, hospice centers and funeral homes — all [designed to shoo death](#) from our domestic sphere — mortality has slowly taken leave of our lives. And with the boom in amateur photography, which now preserves our selves on film or in the cloud, so too has the posthumous portrait, that final chance at memorializing, lost its mandate.

That swerve is the real subject, I think, of **THE HARLEM BOOK OF THE DEAD (Primary Information, \$24)**, a very much alive collection by the Harlem Renaissance society photographer James Van Der Zee, with a brief introduction by Toni Morrison. Ranging from 1920 to the 1950s (remarkably late for this kind of work), these death portraits commissioned by the bereaved at Harlem funeral parlors seem to capture both an ancient acceptance of death and the modern taboos around it.

But look closer. Behind a wistful couple seated in an armchair and cradling their deceased infant, a man, out of focus, stands with his arms crossed: the undertaker. For all their artifice, these are pictures of the funerary process.

Sometimes the images dwell on the paraphernalia as much as the departed themselves. “This is a very fancy casket for a man,” Van Der Zee observes of a cascade of silk ruching that dwarfs one subject in his coffin. That quote comes from an unguarded interview with the sculptor Camille Billops that is reprinted here and alone is worth the book’s price.

Van Der Zee helped commit Black Harlem, its people and its outings, to record. And there is no greater affirmation, this collection would suggest, than in its final ritual. The images collected here might also be the best way to sample his sizable archive, now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Originally published in 1978 and edited by Billops, the book is a relic of a time when such commercial reproduction might have raised fewer ethical concerns.)

Van Der Zee was a jobbing photographer, even when capturing his own daughter, who died around age 16 of appendicitis. But he was also strategic and vivacious, and taken with darkroom trickery. He superimposes verses of poetry, paintings of the Assumption of Mary and snapshots of

his subjects during their lifetimes into his prints, for instance. It all seems to say that you're looking at the memory and the piety of the families who commissioned these images; looking at life itself as much as at death.