

Embalming Mr. Jones

By Jessica Mitford

Mitford's satiric exposé of American funeral home practices led to public outrage against the funeral industry. Until Mitford's book, few people were aware of what they were paying for -- and were not paying for -- in a funeral service. In this chapter, she discusses the common procedure of embalming, a fairly pricey (and little-questioned) procedure routinely performed on American corpses. Her book initiated wide-ranging funeral industry reform.

The drama begins to unfold with the arrival of the corpse at the mortuary.

Alas, poor Yorick! How surprised he would be to see how his counterpart is whisked off to a funeral parlor and is in short order sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged, and neatly dressed -- transformed from a common corpse into a Beautiful Memory Picture. This process is known in the trade as embalming and restorative art, and is so universally employed in the United States and Canada that the funeral director does it routinely, without consulting corpse or kin. ...Yet no law requires embalming, no religious doctrine commends it, nor is it dictated by considerations of health, sanitation, or even personal daintiness. In no part of the world but in North America is it widely used....

Embalming is indeed a most extraordinary procedure, and one must wonder at the docility of Americans who each year pay hundreds of millions of dollars for its perpetuation, blissfully ignorant of what it is all about, what is done, how it is done. Not one in ten thousand has any idea of what actually takes place.... Today, family members who might wish to be in attendance [at an embalming] would certainly be dissuaded by the funeral director. All others, except apprentices, are excluded by law from the preparation room.

A close look at what does actually take place may explain in large measure the undertaker's intractable reticence...Is it possible he fears

that public information about embalming might lead patrons to wonder if they really want this service?... For those who have the stomach for it, let us part the formaldehyde curtain....

The body is first laid out in the undertaker's morgue -- or rather, Mr. Jones is reposing in the preparation room -- to be readied to bid the world farewell.

The preparation room in any of the better funeral establishments has the tiled and sterile look of a surgery, and indeed the embalmer-restorative artist who does his chores there is beginning to adopt the term "dermasurgeon" (appropriately corrupted by some mortician-writers as "demisurgeon") to describe his calling. His equipment, consisting of scalpels, scissors, augurs, forceps, clamps, needles, pumps, tubes, bowls and basins, is crudely imitative of the surgeon's, as is his technique, acquired in a nine- or twelve-month post-high-school course in an embalming school. He is supplied by an advanced chemical industry with a bewildering array of fluids, sprays, pastes, oils, powders, creams, to fix or soften tissue, shrink or distend it as needed, dry it here, restore the moisture there. There are cosmetics, waxes, and paints to fill and cover features, even plaster of Paris to replace entire limbs. There are ingenious aids to prop and stabilize the cadaver: a Vari-Pose Head Rest, the Edwards Arm and Hand Positioner, the Repose Block...and the Throop Foot Positioner, which resembles an old-fashioned stocks....

[One] textbook discusses the all-important time element: "...We conclude that the best results are to be obtained if the subject is embalmed before life is completely extinct -- that is, before cellular death has occurred. In the average case, this would mean within an hour after somatic death."...A comforting thought is offered by another writer. Speaking of fears entertained in the early days of premature burial, he points out, "One of the effects of embalming by chemical injection, however, has been to dispel fears of live burial." How true; once the blood is removed, chances of live burial are indeed remote.

To return to Mr. Jones, the blood is drained out through the veins and replaced by embalming fluid...If Flextone is used, it will produce a "mild flexible rigidity...ideal for women and children." It may be

blended with B. and G. Products Company's Lyf-Lyk tint, which is guaranteed to reproduce "nature's own skin texture..." About three to six gallons of a dyed and perfumed solution of formaldehyde, glycerin, borax, phenol, alcohol, and water is soon circulating through Mr. Jones...

The next step is to have at Mr. Jones with a thing called a trocar. This is a long, hollow needle attached to a tube. It is jabbed into the abdomen, poked around the entrails and chest cavity, the contents of which are pumped out and replaced with "cavity fluid." This done, and the hole in the abdomen sewn up, Mr. Jones' face is heavily creamed (to protect the skin from burns which may be caused by leakage of the chemicals) and he is covered with a sheet and left unmolested for awhile. But not for long -- there is more, much more in store for him....

The object of all this attention to the corpse, it must be remembered, is to make it presentable for viewing in an attitude of healthy repose. "Our customs require the presentation of our dead in the semblance of normality...unmarred by the ravages of illness, disease, or mutilation," says Mr. J. Sheridan Mayer in his *Restorative Art*. This is rather a large order since few people die in the full bloom of health, unravaged by illness and unmarked by some disfigurement. The funeral industry is equal to the challenge: "...The task of restoration may seem impossible and shake the confidence of the embalmer. This is the time for intestinal fortitude and determination. Once the formative work is begun...all doubts of success vanish. It is surprising and gratifying to discover the results which may be obtained."

The embalmer, having allowed an appropriate interval to elapse, returns to the attack, but now he brings into play the skill and equipment of sculptor and cosmetician. Is a hand missing? Casting one in plaster of Paris is a simple matter....If a lip or two, a nose or an ear should be missing, the embalmer has at hand a variety of restorative waxes with which to model replacements. Pores and skin texture are simulated by stippling with a little brush, and over this cosmetics are laid on. Head off? Decapitation cases are rather routinely handled....It is a good idea to have a little something at the neck -- scarf or high collar -- when time for viewing comes. Swollen mouth? Cut out tissue

as needed from inside the lips. If too much is removed, the surface contour can easily be restored by padding with cotton....

If Mr. Jones has died of jaundice, the embalming fluid will very likely turn him green. Does this deter the embalmer? Not if he has intestinal fortitude. Masking paste and cosmetics are heavily laid on, burial garments and casket interiors are color-correlated with particular care, and Jones is displayed beneath rose-colored lights. Friends will say, "How *well* he looks" Death by carbon monoxide, on the other hand, can be a rather good thing from the embalmer's viewpoint: "One advantage is the fact that this type of discoloration is an exaggerated form of a natural pink coloration." This is nice because the healthy glow is already present and needs but little attention.

The patching and filling completed, Mr. Jones is now shaved, washed, and dressed. Cream-based cosmetic...is applied to his hands and face, his hair is shampooed and combed (and, in the case of Mrs. Jones, set), his hands manicured...."If he were not in the habit of having them manicured in life, trimming and shaping is advised for better appearance -- never questioned by kin."

Jones is now ready for casketing (this is the present participle of the verb "to casket")....Proper placement of the body requires a delicate sense of balance. It should lie as high as possible in the casket, yet not so high that the lid, when lowered, will hit the nose. On the other hand, we are cautioned, placing the body too low "creates the impression that the body is in a box."

Jones is next wheeled into the appointed slumber room where a few last touches may be added -- his favorite pipe placed in his hand or, if he was a great reader, a book propped into position. (In the case of little Master Jones, a Teddy bear may be clutched.) Here he will hold open house for a few days, visiting hours 10AM to 9PM.