

L'Inconnue Transcript Season 4, Episode 3

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at L'Inconnue of the Seine, an unnamed drowning victim who went on to live two different and peculiar afterlives.

I'd love to know what you think of these episodes, so please come and find me on Twitter: [@GudrunLauret](https://twitter.com/GudrunLauret), or leave a comment on your audio player of choice. Alternatively, you can pop a message onto the relevant podcast page over at gudrunlauret.com/podcast, where you'll find the shownotes, useful links and an episode transcript – no email address required to access that.

I included this story in my Time Pieces History Project [blog](#) about masks, and I found it fascinating, not least because it fits in so well with the Victorian taste for the macabre and is less disturbing than their fondness for photographing the dead (and stuffing the dead...). That habit continues to freak me out whenever I think about it. Google with caution.

Estimated to be about 16 years old, the Unknown Woman was pulled out of the Seine in Paris sometime in the 1880s. There were no marks or signs of a struggle on the body, leading investigators of the day to conclude she was most likely a suicide.

Much like the Thames in London, the River Seine was a prime location for drownings, whether accidentally or on purpose, as well as an ideal dumping ground for murder victims. Both are deceptively long and deep bodies of water, and it wasn't unusual for people to fall in at one point and wash up at another.

Between April 1795 and September 1801, over 300 bodies were pulled out of the Seine, both adults and children, and all would have been dealt with by the two mortuary clerks working in Paris at the time and who catalogued everyone who passed through (these records can still be viewed today).

At the time, it was common to put unidentified corpses on display in the mortuary, ostensibly in case they could be claimed, but mostly because it was a fun and free trip out for the locals. In fact, the morgue became a more popular tourist spot than both the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower, and some victims were displayed for a few days because so many people wanted to see them (these were usually children or those who had been executed).

The face of L'Inconnue in particular was mesmerising to everyone who viewed her, resulting in an attendant making a cast. Copies of this were snapped up and on show in private homes across Europe (I told you the Victorians were weird!), and author Albert Camus whimsically renamed her "The Drowned Mona Lisa."

Her face was endlessly sketched, writers concocted elaborate, tragic histories for her, and she was regarded as an aesthetic ideal for a generation of German girls, which doesn't say much about how society viewed women. But that's a conversation for another day!

As if all that wasn't enough, L'Inconnue's strange third life began in the 20th century. Norwegian toymaker Asmund Laerdal was initially famous for his realistic 'Anne' doll, with natural looking hair and a face in repose.

His toy company was founded in 1940, and Laerdal perfected the use of synthetic plastic (PVC) in doll casting – the Anne model was named 'doll of the year' in the early 1960s. Laerdal was also asked to apply his talents to producing life-like wounds for the Norwegian Civil Defence to use in military training

After his young son nearly drowned in 1955, Laerdal performed CPR, making him the perfect person to sculpt a doll for resuscitation practice when it became clear one was needed. He adapted Anne in 1958, working with a pair of doctors to get it right, giving her the face of the unknown drowning victim and a human-adult-sized body.

He decided it was preferable for men to get to practice on a female doll, but we won't talk about that either. Known as CPR Annie in the US and Rescue Anne elsewhere, it's estimated that 2m lives have been saved using techniques taught with the dummies, and the Laerdal factory still produces the dolls today.

An interesting tale, but it's hard not to consider all of this from a modern viewpoint – the idea of making the unfortunate dead into a spectacle sits uncomfortably, but for me it highlights the objectification of women – or am I making too much of this? Of course, we can never know what may have caused this particular young woman to throw herself into a cold river, but we can hazard a guess.

I don't think this is the time to dig too deeply into this, but there are a lot of things to reflect on here – female ideals as defined by men and probably a comment on how to behave, too. Not to mention Laerdal's preference for men kissing dead women's faces... anyway, please let me know your thoughts on today's show, and I'll speak to you next time.