

Murder, Drugs and Crime in L.A. Police Photographs

By [Robert Lee](#)

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The photographs were hidden away in the Los Angeles police department's archive until discovered by Morton. The exhibit is on show till April 29.

Bullet holes in a window, a man lying on the floor with a pool of blood around his head, all photos of crime and death in a city, Los Angeles, that knows how to show death in many ways.

This is not Hollywood, but real-life photos of the Los Angeles police department now on display at the Multimedia Art Museum, a part of the Photo Biennial 2012.

The photos would have likely been lost but for police photographer Merrick Morton who discovered a treasure trove in a huge archive of photographs of the city's police department. Many of them were in an advanced stage of decomposition, but Morton teamed up with fellow policeman Lieutenant John Thomas, a city police history specialist, to save the photos.

The result of their labor is a unique selection of archive shots by a number of police

photographers, many anonymous, working in L.A.

Overworked detectives in trilbies and trench coats stare wearily at murder scenes, sorry-faced shoplifters show off the tricks of their trade and the haunted stares of assault victims are trapped in black and white.

The photos were taken in between 1910 and the 1960s, a period that saw upheaval, economic collapse, swift change and various crime spikes. Murder victims are often shown without pity, and anyone who knows the often-graphic photos that appear in Russian newspapers after a gangland killing will recognize the style.

"You can make comparisons with artistic photography from totally different fields," said the exhibit curator Tobia Bezzola, saying some reminded him of Walker Evans, the American photographer who documented the Great Depression. "Some of them look like surrealism," he said. "Some even look like conceptual photography."

The cinematic quality of many of the shots on display is so strong that many visitors will feel as if they are looking at a still from a newly discovered film noir. It is a natural reaction as the shots are from Los Angeles, the home of Hollywood and its dark underbelly.

The exhibition is not an entirely grizzly affair. Touches of humor can be found in many of the shots like the smiling officer sheepishly holding a

Christmas-tree-proportioned marijuana find.

"People familiar with the history of photography will hopefully understand that there is not only canonical history with the big names, but also great work done anonymously, even in the public service" Bezzola said.

It is certainly striking how well many of the photographs stand up on pure artistic criteria. Whether consciously or not they often show pleasing compositional techniques toying with horizontal and vertical lines and the use of reflections to either illuminate or obscure.

"They are simply beautiful photographs!" said Bezzola.

"The Art of the Archive. Photographs From the Archives of the Los Angeles Police Department" runs at the Multimedia Art Museum until April 29. 16 Ulitsa Ostozhenka. Metro Kropotkinskaya. www.mamm-mdf.ru

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