



Distinguished Alumnus

Stanley Benjamin Burns, MD, FACS '64

Stanley B. Burns, MD, FACS '64, a New York City ophthalmologist, is research professor of medicine, clinical professor of psychiatry, professor of medical humanities, and adjunct professor of obstetrics/gynecology at New York University Langone Health. He is the founder and executive director of The Burns Collection and Archive, a historical photography collection of more than one million images from the dawn of photography to the atomic age. The archive includes the largest private comprehensive collection of early medical photography, and world-class collections of war, crime, African-American, Judaica, and memorial photography. Using this assemblage of unique images as a resource, Dr. Burns has authored 49 texts, 11 essays, and more than 1,100 articles. He has curated over 100 exhibitions and consulted on hundreds of documentaries, television series, and feature films. For more than four decades, Burns has used his photographs and words to bring attention to the history of medicine—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Burns' interest in history began as a young boy in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Born before World War II, his curiosity about the background of the war and the Holocaust fueled his desire to learn history, and how attitudes are created, perpetuated, and expressed. The luncheonette he frequented, just one block from his childhood home, was the headquarters of Murder Incorporated, the notorious mob enforcer group, which sparked his interest in crime history. His fascination with war and weaponry can be traced to

summers in the Catskills, where stories from the son of a Civil War veteran mesmerized him. His childhood hobby of stamp collecting was the foundation for his encyclopedic knowledge of geography and history and expressed his love of collecting.

Burns attended PS 183, JHS 252 and 64 and graduated from Franklin K. Lane High School. He attended Brooklyn College from 1956 to 1960, where he excelled in organic chemistry and comparative anatomy, so much so, that he achieved the honor of being excused from final exams. This gave Burns the confidence that he would be successful in the profession of medicine, and he chose to study at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse. SUNY Upstate offered him a lifestyle and experience that provided opportunities, opening doors that have not closed. The close-knit and supportive Syracuse medical community encouraged and enabled him to create his unique path in life. The school's location not only offered him an appreciation of the outdoors but also provided many antique exhibitions and shops to support his collecting habit.

In 1961, Burns moved into an attic apartment, the former home of Dr. Frank, where boxes of abandoned books and instruments remained, relics of the 1910s. Burns decorated the apartment walls with the instruments, and the books intensified his enthusiasm for medical history. His interest in neurosurgery and psychiatry garnered two NIMH fellowships in psychiatry and resulted in his first published paper

“Visual Vigilance and Brain Damage.” A neurosurgery elective with Dr. Robert King turned his interest to surgery. Among Burns' great adventures at Syracuse was a part-time job at Jamesville Penitentiary. He walked the cell rows, performed sick calls, and slept overnight as a jailhouse doc. Syracuse felt like home by 1962, when his younger brother Barry Burns entered Upstate, graduating in 1968 with a Ph.D.

Burns regularly photographed his classes and classmates. His photos of Ernest Becker, Aldous Huxley, Thomas Szasz, and other psychiatric notables would become part of his historic photograph collection. His photography led him to become photography editor of the 1964 yearbook.

After graduating, Burns began a general surgical internship at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in San Francisco. It was during the Vietnam War; the hospital cared for Merchant Marine, Coast Guard, and Navy personnel. In 1965, he continued as a resident in general surgery. He noticed that Coast Guard rescue helicopters dropping off patients at the facility had no onboard medical personnel. He was instrumental in convincing the Coast Guard to stop first at the hospital to pick up a surgeon for rescue missions. It relieved Coast Guard personnel from medical responsibility and gave hospital staff first responder experience. Burns performed air-sea rescue work for two years, taking some of his best photographs from those rescue flights. Enjoying delicate surgery, detailed observation, and with interest in visual phenomenon, Burns sought an ophthalmology residency.



Dr. Burns in the Burns Collection and Archive

Burns began his ophthalmology residency at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital on Staten Island in 1967. During this time, he moonlighted in Brooklyn, taking house calls for local physicians who were relieved not to go out after hours. He married Linda Amiel (for a time) and had two children, Elizabeth and Jason, both of whom work with him today. Liz is the creative and operations director of The Burns Archive, and Jason is the media director. In 1970, Burns began his ophthalmology practice as an assistant in two ophthalmology

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offices, Joseph Laval, MD, the former chief at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and Milton Berliner, MD, a chief at New York Eye and Ear Infirmary. Burns had appointments at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat, Lenox Hill, and Mt. Sinai hospitals. He opened his own office in 1972, purchasing the practice of Isidore Givner, MD. Soon afterward, he also took over the practice of Martin

Kilmann, MD, a noted Berlin ophthalmologist who emigrated to the United States in 1936. Kilmann's practice was filled with German Holocaust survivors, as well as former Nazi soldiers. Assuming his practice satisfied Burns' thirst for first-hand knowledge of World War II and the Holocaust.

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unrelated collections and aggressively began purchasing photographs. He scoured flea markets, estate sales, antique shops, and auctions. In 1978, he held his first exhibition at Adelphi University, *One Thousand Words...*, exhibiting more than 1,000 photographs. His collection was lauded by Time/Life's *Encyclopedia of Collectables*, as one of the top historic photography collections in America. After the exhibition, sponsored by Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Syracuse, he wrote *Bristol Gallery of Medical History*, a medical historical photography journal from 1981-1989. He published his first book in 1983, *Early Medical Photography in America*.

In 1984, noted curator Marvin Heiferman invited Burns to co-create an exhibit, *In the Picture of Health*, the world's first public exhibition of medical photography. In 1985, Burns presented *Medical Photography as Art* at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. Artist Joel-Peter Witkin, co-curated *Masterpieces of Medical Photography: Selections from the Burns Archive*. It won an ICP best photography book award in 1987. By the end of the 1980s, historic medical photography was recognized and collected by major museums.

Burns uncovered and explained the cultural phenomena of memorial photography in his 1991 landmark book, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*. Photographing a deceased loved one was common practice in the 19th century as part of the memorialization ritual. The book awakened a suppressed thread in American culture. The publication was fea-



Dr. Burns with the R.B. Bontecou, MD Civil War Collection

tured on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*, and *American Heritage* magazine published a series of the photographs with commentary by John Updike. In 1997, Burns won a gold Telly Award for his two-hour documentary, *Death in America*. The 2002 *Le Dernier Portrait* exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay featured many of Burns' memorial photographs. Interest in memorial photography has not subsided to this day. The most recent exhibit was in 2019 Berlin, one of about a hundred of Burns' exhibitions on memorialization. His work in the field of mourning and bereavement has informed and inspired writers, artists, musicians, curators, filmmakers, the public, and also many hospitals, which have resurrected the practice of photographing deceased infants.

First and foremost, Burns is a

historian and the knowledge he uncovers he shares through his books and exhibitions. Providing medical history to the profession he wrote, *Respiratory Disease, Oncology, Dermatology, Psychiatry, Nephrology, Ophthalmology*, each a four-volume series, all with accompanying exhibitions. In *Face of Mercy*, he explores medicine in war and the photographs in *A Morning's Work*, reveal medicine and disease before antiseptic procedures were implemented. Through the publication of *Shooting Soldiers*, he explored Civil War medicine and the photography of surgeon R.B. Bontecou, which was then featured at *Photography and The American Civil War* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Deadly Intent* exposed the darker side of crime and punishment in America; with photographs presented in the

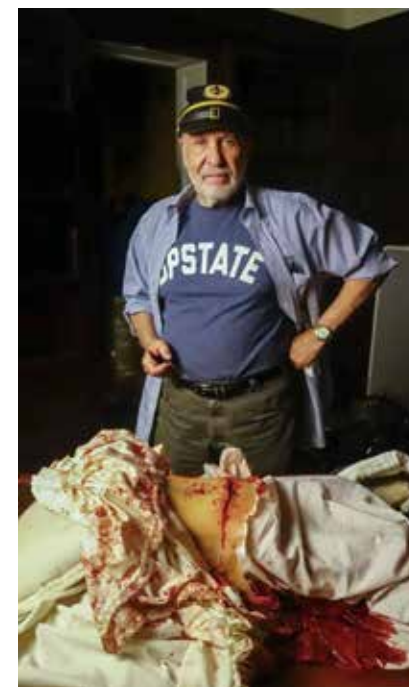


Dr. Burns on the set of HBO/Cinemax's The Knick

exhibition *Crime Stories* at the MET as well. *Stiffs, Skulls & Skeletons: Medical Photography and Symbolism* explored the skeleton and cadaver in photographic history, as well as dissection photography, a common ritual of medical students. There have been dozens of exhibitions and documentaries featuring his Judaica and African-American collections.

Over the years, countless articles and profiles have been written on Burns and his collection. He was recognized as one of "America's Top 100 Collectors" by *Arts and Antiques Magazine*, one

of "New York's most Passionate Collectors" by *New York Magazine* and named one of the six influencers in photography in *Aperture's Connoisseurs and Collectors*. Believing in the power of photography and history, he has donated tens of thousands of photographs to 24 museums, founding some of their collections. Burns has consulted on dozens of feature films and television series. He was the on-set Historical, Medical and Technical Advisor on the HBO/Cinemax series *The Knick* and PBS's *Mercy Street*, and is now a member of the Screen Actors Guild for his role as a surgeon



Dr. Burns on the set of PBS's Mercy Street

in Martin Scorsese's 2019 film, *The Irishman*. Currently, he is writing, *In The Pink...*, a history of female sexuality, vaginal rejuvenation, and labiaplasty. When not collecting or seeing patients, Burns spends his time consulting, lecturing, creating exhibits, and writing books on under-appreciated areas of history and photography, sharing his knowledge, and rare and unusual photographs worldwide. ■

Bio submitted by Dr. Burns. He can be reached through his website www.burnsarchive.com.