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It is sometimes said that death is the last taboo, but it was not always so. For centuries, religious establishments constructed decorated ossuaries and charnel houses that stand as masterpieces of art created from human bone. These unique structures have been pushed into the footnotes of history; they were part of a dialogue with death that is now silent.

The sites in this specially photographed and brilliantly original study range from the Monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Palermo, where the living would visit mummified or skeletal remains and lovingly dress them; to the Paris catacombs; to fantastic bone-encrusted creations in Austria, Cambodia, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Italy, Peru, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and elsewhere.

Paul Koudounaris photographed more than seventy sites for this book. He analyzes the role of these remarkable memorials within the cultures that created them, as well as the mythology and folklore that developed around them, and skillfully traces a remarkable human endeavor.

The Empire of Death: A Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses Details

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From Reader Review The Empire of Death: A Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses for online ebook

Brian says

I saw a copy of this at the Esoteric Book Conference in Seattle, It looks outstanding! Can't wait to get this.

Draga Corinthia says

Wow, this book is outstanding, in terms of the photos, the production, and the research and clarity of the text. It is also a completely unique book--nothing like it has ever appeared that I have ever seen (and I am very interested and literate in subject matter involving both macabre art and religious art history/architecture). I have talked to other people who now own this book, and they are all of the same opinion. In fact, in many ways I think it introduces an entirely new area of study in the history of visual culture. The only negative comment I have seen about this book on this or any other site is a reviewer here who said the text left things to be desired--I am assuming in that case the person wanted more text, because the text that is in the book is extremely well written, erudite, and factual (the book is balanced between photos and text, and I think the text is probably about 40,000 words). Well, I have worked for and with publishers, and I can tell you that they brought this book to market at the lowest price point they possibly could considering the way it was produced, and the decision to keep the text at a certain length was no doubt based on economic factors in retailing the book--if that person wants something more along the lines of a textbook, great, but it would have cost double. Compromises need to be made in today's book market, and the decisions made while putting this book together are spot on--it coheres very well in its aesthetics and presentation.

Peter Jakobsen says

Those who have gone before well outnumber those of the transitory present and are more swiftly forgotten. It is now overwhelmingly the fashion in Australia to incinerate the dead – burial is a considerable ongoing expense and the real estate is rented (in due course, urban cemeteries will reclaim the space). This incredible book shows and tells us of the veneration of the dead in 17C-19C catholic Europe (and parts of South America and south east Asia) in ossuaries and charnel houses. The pictures have to be seen to be believed: mountains of bones; garlands of skulls, cages and display cabinets of bones; crosses of skulls, chapels of bones encrusted with skulls, immense grinning cairns of skulls; bones dressed, whitened with lime, lovingly painted or inscribed. Emblematic of the antique catholic tendency to emphasize the majesty of death, these shrines also speak with eloquent silence to our non-doctrinal need, as Freud expressed it, “to make friends with the necessity of dying.” This is beautifully written and researched, though it will give a modern sensibility the absolute creeps.

Alis says

This is a landmark book on ossuaries, especially decorative and architecturally arranged ones. It also has many fantastic pictures, some of which are not available on the web and the inside cover plots the ossuaries on a map. Aside from that, it's an attractive addition to any library in the hard-cover format.

Koudounaris' argument seems to be that charnel houses created an arena for the dead and the living to communicate, which reached its height in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His goal is to explain the separation between this conversational attitude and the feelings of confusion, disgust, and even shame over such practices in post-Enlightenment Western Europe.

John says

Not a book about Florida in the 1980's. Sorry guys. Great text about the renaissance era predilection for constructing elaborate ossuaries, or bone palaces. Monks all across Europe used human bones to create works of unparalleled splendor and gloominess. From holy mummies to bone chandeliers, these constructions are often awe inspiring. While the extensive photographic documentation of ossuaries is the star, the various essays dissecting the obsession many holy orders of the period had with human remains is also worth the slog. Best if read by torch light.

Matt says

I bought "Empire of Death" for my brother for Christmas because I figured this would fit in nicely with his collection of taxidermic flying lizards, antique promotional flyers and headshots of circus performers, and other fascinating doodads that he seems to acquire for the sole purpose of littering his studio apartment. However, after he squealed with delight upon opening his gift (this is seriously the best thing I've ever bought him), I immediately snatched the book from him and spent the remainder of Christmas curled up by the fire, occasionally shouting things like "Oh my god, it's an infant skeleton in a crib!" or "They fucking bejeweled this monk mummy!" It was a good Christmas. This is a fantastic book.

Paperclippe says

This was beautiful and insightful and had wonderful photographs. Highly recommended for anyone in the death community or if you just love dark art or unusual history. My only complaints were the tiny font size - and I just got new glasses, but come on - and that I wish it had gone more in depth, but the further reading section in the back is kind of a treasure trove. I have yet to properly go through it but I see a lot of names I recognize and it's probably worth digging into.

Mel says

Bill bought me this for Christmas. We've visited several ossuaries and the Paris catacombs and I always wanted to know how one Earth people started building things like that. This book was a wonderful cultural history of the subject with lots and lots of amazing photos. It explained the origins of the decorated churches and crypts, how they came to be, what they represented, the folklore and superstition of different areas and

churches, how the local people related to the bones, and how the different structures developed over time. I learned so much! What I thought was most fascinating was the fact that most were built in the 18th and 19th centuries. I had imagined them to be much older, but it was fascinating to think that they had developed in more "modern" times. It also includes a map and list of all the different ossuaries so you can easily plan which to visit. If you are at all interested in the subject I can't recommend this book highly enough.

Edward Sullivan says

A fascinating, insightful look at ossuaries and charnel houses primarily in continental Europe. Abundantly illustrated with excellent quality color photographs.

Elizabeth Judd Taylor says

Excellent photography and interesting information about ossuaries and charnel houses.

Giovanna says

Un'opera straordinaria frutto di un'intensa ricerca e di una grande passione per l'oggetto di studio che tuttavia risulta molto chiara anche per un pubblico non avvezzo all'antropologia, alla storia dell'arte e alle altre discipline che si intrecciano in questo libro, merito anche delle bellissime fotografie. L'unica pecca che riscontro riguarda la trattazione di determinati siti in capitoli a mio avviso sbagliati: ad esempio ritengo che sarebbe stato più logico inserire i paragrafi riguardanti la Cripta della Chiesa dei Santi Pietro e Paolo a Melník nel capitolo finale dove si discute della conservazione e della ricostruzione degli ossari. Così facendo il lettore potrebbe capire meglio per quale motivo un antropologo abbia deciso di riorganizzare le ossa in tale cripta, poiché in quel capitolo vengono riportati esempi simili.

Frederic says

There's a lot of good information here, and some nice photos, but overall it left me wanting more. The book design - particularly the type size, but also layout - makes it something of a pain to try and read. The inclusion of non-traditional examples (e.g., the Cambodian memorial stupa for victims of the killing fields) is a nice touch, but suggests a completeness of global coverage that isn't really achieved. Much better is his *Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures & Spectacular Saints from the Catacombs* which I had read before this one.

Anne says

This book is an astounding resource, and the first of its kind as far as I know. The sheer number and variety of ossuary sites described and depicted won't be found in any other book, and the text is very rigorous and detailed. Some might quibble with the over-reliance on Baudrillard's theories of death in the introduction, but the author puts these concepts to good use in describing the significance of ossuaries to the people who made

them - they weren't chambers of horror, but sites where the living and the dead continued to relate to one another. Koudounaris also carefully distinguishes the evolving meanings of ossuaries and charnels in the different eras of history in which they appeared.

The photographs (by the author) are dazzling, and I'm in awe both of the effort it took to travel to and photograph all the sites, and the photographic skill of the images. On occasion I wished that, for sites where only one or two photographs appear, the photographs chosen had been more representative of the space as a whole instead of, perhaps, a dramatic angle into the eye socket of a skull. Also (with my architectural bias) I wished there was a bit more emphasis on the spatial qualities of the interiors; also a floor plan or two would have been nice to see. The author is an art historian, though, and usually describes the ossuaries as artworks rather than as architectural spaces primarily.

The book is gorgeously produced. The frontmatter says "Design and Art Direction by Barnbrook." Fabulous book, Barnbrook. I love the way you picked up the arrangements of skulls and bones in some of the more classicizing ossuaries and quoted those geometries in the page layouts. But...would it have KILLED you to use a slightly larger typeface? The dedicated reader will lose a few retinal cells in the effort to read the text portions of this book under any kind of ordinary light. And as for the few pages that have a red background - no. Just no.

With those quibbles aside - This book will knock your eyes out and absolutely fascinate you. I hope libraries everywhere will carry it too. If you feel like traveling to see any of these places for yourself, there is an appendix giving the location of each and information about how to visit them.

Jenny says

Like everyone says this is a beautifully produced book, well researched and written. However the design of the book makes it virtually unreadable. Despite the book being very large there's tons of white space and the text is minuscule. On some pages the 6 pt black font is produced on dark red backgrounds. Did anyone consider someone might want to actually read this book instead of put it on their coffee table?

David says

Awesome book. Putting some of the places on my European "to visit" list.
