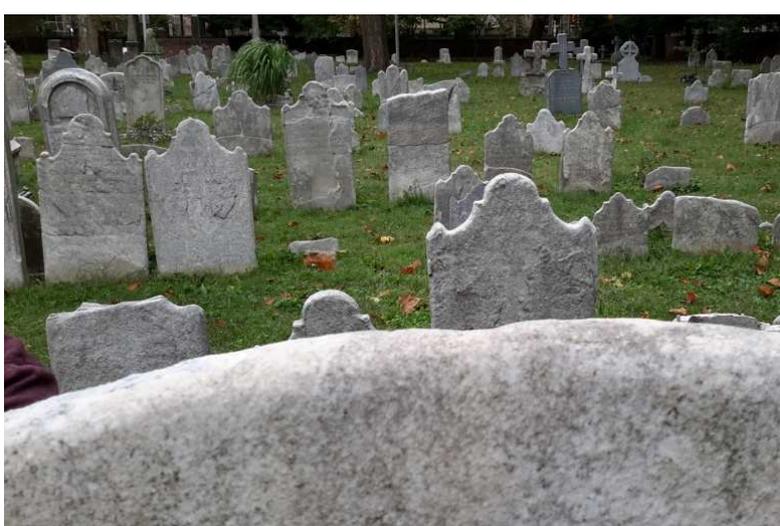


Death Salon at Mütter Museum Philadelphia 2015

Sunday noon, people gathered for a guided tour organized by the Obscura Society Philly (short for Philadelphia) through historic St. Peter's Episcopal Church Cemetery, Old Pine Church Graveyard, and Christ Church Burial Ground. Among many things, we learned how the shapes of tombstones used to be modelled after the fashion of mirror frames of their time. How symbolic. And curiosity was satisfied as to what's inside overground vaults; they're empty and just a way to show off while the body is buried below ground. The highlight and end of the tour was a visit to the grave of Benjamin Franklin who'd once said "In this world nothing can be said to be certain but death and taxes."



The same evening, guests with a VIP ticket celebrated the Death Ball (dress code: haute macabre). As my camera couldn't handle the dim room, the reader has to imagine the splendid figures in their elaborate dresses and gents with top hats and walking sticks. Special guests were The Divine Hands Ensemble who treated us to authentic funeral music; compositions for the dead, played at the gravesite to help the soul rise from the grave and ascend

to heaven. Now, you might imagine that our queen Megan Rosenbloom (director of Death Salon) led us into the Dance of Death there and then, instead, we got acquainted with each other and said hello to old friends. And we had good reason to feel pleased as all the proceeds will benefit a local hospice.

Monday morning, the director and a curator gave the Death Salon a very warm welcome at the famous Mütter Museum. The first speech was by Dr. Marianne Hamel, a medical examiner who told us how the real job is so not like the way it's presented on TV. She warned us explicitly about drug abuse (including alcohol) as these people land on her table way before their time. She also told us that murder occurs seldom and if, then more often than not within your inner circle of people. On the other hand, you can simply be at the wrong place at the wrong time (e.g. in an accident). She also confessed that in crime, not all cases get solved.

Her talk was followed by Alexis Jeffcoat and Emma Stern who put the rave back into the graveyard at local Laurel Hill Cemetery. They told us stories they'd researched about the people buried at their cemetery because these are the inspirations for the various activities they offer to the public. Another reason they're offering these activities is to maintain the historic cemetery.

Next, Ryan Matthew Cohn talked about medical specimens and what kind of material they're made of like: wax, papier mâché, ivory, (in recent times) plastic, and real body parts. The question of the ethics of obtaining human remains (e.g. skull) was raised. There are strict laws, yet they can differ from state to state. Ryan started to work on human remains with the same tools he used to work on jewelry and

learned through trial and error as he had difficulty finding sources on how to best handle the materials.



After his speech followed a panel about Hart Island, a tax funded cemetery in NYC that obtains unclaimed bodies after one month and buries them in mass graves. The island, which is closed to the public, now holds one million dead. Finding no cemetery stated on a death certificate means it has been delivered to Hart Island. Only relatives can now visit the island with special permission and under certain circumstances. Hopefully, public access will follow as activists raise awareness and protest.

Break time was filled with congratulating speakers, talking to other attendees, and visiting the Dark Artisans' Bazaar with stalls offering merchandise like books and t-shirts as well as unimaginable things from the obscure like hand-crafted crystal crowns, jewelry made from bugs and animal bones, filigree skeleton paper cuts in tin boxes, crocheted bird skele-

tons, and genuine mourning jewelry made out of hair of the deceased, to mention just a few. I guess that most attendees were curious about what brought others here. I got to observe some enlightening moments as people came to realize they were among friends and their positive interest in death is not weird but desirable and a good deed.



Evi Numen told us the story of a prisoner in Philadelphia in the 19th century, a time when there was a shortage of legal bodies for medical education. After his death, his organs were taken out without permission to be used as medical specimens. Also, several bodies got snatched from the African-American Cemetery and receipts prove that 'bargain bodies' were available. The scandals led to the Anatomy Act which aimed to prevent body snatching while giving medical schools the legal right to obtain unclaimed bodies.

Molly Geeson followed with her talk about how mummies are taken care of at museums these days. As little as possible is done to them, yet, mistakes from the past have to be rectified. The history of the mummies are also researched through old pictures of museum exhibitions and newspapers, when they were sensationally mentioned. Everything done or undone gets documented carefully.

Dr. Paul Koudounaris talked about mummies, too. In Indonesia, the mummified dead are taken out of their graves and celebrated with. Gruesome as this may seem, it is but another approach to death. There are in fact many cultures who don't separate 'us' (the living) from 'them' (the dead). There, the interaction with the dead isn't symbolical; it's real and it's magic. Dead people have power. Much weirder, it seems, is how estranged we westerners are from our dead. A thought worth considering.



The following panel was about the research project on books bound in human skin. The main reasons to make them were medical books adding to a doctors collection (they didn't find this the least strange at the time) and as an extra punishment for prisoners (the books often being about them and their misdeeds). Books labelled as being bound in human skin are found in libraries all over the world and the project tests if they're genuine. A lot are not but made from sheep, cow, and even faux leather. Mütter Museum displayed its genuine examples especially for us.

The end of the talks wasn't the end of the day. In the evening, the doors to Mütter Muse-

um reopened exclusively for the Death Salon, with free access to the museum and guided tours. Skulls and skeletons, wax models, and preserved specimens show how the human body works or fails. Some of the abnormalities on display look terrifying and I found just looking at them painful. However, what is a spectacle for the public is actually very useful for professionals in the medical field.

Upstairs, we enjoyed a local beer with rosemary (a symbol for love and remembrance of the dead) that has been especially brewed for Death Salon, together with Philly's traditional pretzel with mustard and popcorn, while listening to Lavinia Jones Wright speak about the history of murder ballads and a live band performing a range of them for us.

Day two started with Sarah Troop courageously sharing her personal experience of losing a child and how her Mexican background offered her a way out of her isolation. Mexicans have an open relationship with the dead. The day before Dia de los Muertos is Dia des los Angelitos for the smaller children who are believed to die pure and turn into supernatural spirits with the power to grant wishes. Sarah Troop got her wish granted, at least in



the comfort she found in the ways of her ancestors. Asked, what outsiders can do when confronted with a family losing a child, she begs people to break the silence and say something; anything.

Norma Bowe is the teacher of The Death Class now famous thanks to the book by the same title by Erika Hayasaki. The course has a three year waiting list. Instead of talking about death, Norma Bowe takes her students on field trips to: a hospice, a cemetery, a funeral home, a crematory, a postmortem from beginning to end, and a maximum security prison where they meet murderers. She doesn't only expose her students to the facets of real death but does debriefings and writing assignments (for reflection) or taking a break for playing outside in a pile of leaves. The direct experience of death has an effect on the students as they come to realise how fragile life is. Out of the courses come projects called 'be the change' (that you want to see) where the (former) students engage in community work. Norma Bowe motherly by nature, even with the Death Salon crowd, when she encouraged us to continue with our valuable work.

Elisabeth Harper talked about the art and science of incorrupt saints. These are bodies, mostly of clergy, that appear not to decay and are often kept and displayed in churches. They're considered miracles and are one of many steps to become a saint. Scientific tests showed that the bodies on display are more often than not wax figures. Is it all a fake, then? It turns out that by definition the state of the body at the moment of exhumation is important. Any decay after that does not corrupt the incorrupted.

Next was David Orr with his Perfect Vessels. He was allowed to photograph skulls at the Mütter Museum and made the pictures

symmetrical by mirroring one side of the skull into mere perfection. He explained how the human brain is wired to look for symmetry and how we find it very attractive. That a vessel is defined as a cup or bowl, a craft for traveling on water, as well as a person regarded as holder or receiver of something nonmaterial (among others), gave the title of the speech its own aesthetics.

After lunch break, Dr. Erin Lockard let us know about her experience as a trained doctor caring for her dying mother. Treatments were thrown at the dying patient because medical interventions snowball at hospitals. The experience has made the doctor more compassionate towards her own patients and she can see some changes as medical professionals are getting more flexible. Studies have showed that terminal patients live longer and better if



palliative care is introduced early in their treatment. The answer to the main question "what defines quality of life to you?" will help both, the patient as well as the doctor.

Mütter Museum director Robert Hicks raised questions about our dialog with the dead in museums: Should the dead be exhibited in museums (e.g. mummies)? Should pa-



thology museums be open to medical professionals only? How about the implications of displays of women (e.g. female anatomical models presented in an erotic manner)? How about the display of children (e.g. 'monstrous births' like conjoined twins)? How about death in art and pop culture (e.g. romper suit with skull motif)? His answer is that we need to articulate an aesthetic of death, decay, and mortality.

Next was Christine Colby giving her speech about transgender people being misgendered on their death certificates and at their own funerals. There have been two scandalous cases lately that made it into the news. Now, there's the Respect After Death Act in California. As other states are not as progressive, preparation is everything. Make a living will, state what you want and who you wish to take care of things at the end of your life and afterwards. Rule out people you don't want around. Appoint a trusted person as your executor, inform this person, and hand over the necessary papers. Do keep your instruction for how to dispose of your body away from your last will and testament as they'll come into action

much later, when you are (hopefully) already resting in peace.

Last but not least was an 'Ask a Mortician' live session with splendid Caitlin Doughty (Death Salon co-founder, LA undertaker, maker of youtube series 'Ask a Mortician', and author of 'Smoke gets in Your Eyes and Other Lessons from the Crematory') and Sheri Booker (award winning author of 'Nine Years Under. Coming to age in an inner-city funeral home'). Among the many questions were: 'How to talk to children about death?' Be specific and tell the truth. 'Ever dropped a body?' No. 'Anyone ever woken from the dead?' No. 'Ever seen anything supernatural?' Caitlin: No. Sheila: Ghost present at funeral home. 'Are there cultural differences in embalming?' Caitlin: USA is very specific about how it's done and she's offering more natural options. Sheila: Lots of homicides and a day-long viewing in the Afro-American community makes reconstruction and embalming necessary and common.

And though the talks and panels at the Mütter Museum and the macabre market were

over, Death Salon wasn't, yet. On our last evening together, we teamed up in a bar for a round of Death Quizzo (quizzo being a popular local bar game) testing our knowledge and our wits and having one last drink before we finally had to say goodbye.



My report's not able to do justice to every person responsible for this wonderful event. It is merely the digestion of a wonderful experience as I felt very comfortable among the many likeminded people. All subjects are merely touched and can be extensively researched through the internet and books. And if you've missed my report of Death Salon UK 2014, I'm happy to e-mail it (in English or German) on request. So, all hail deathlings out there and may we meet again! Thank you.

Sarah Buchmann, October 2015
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