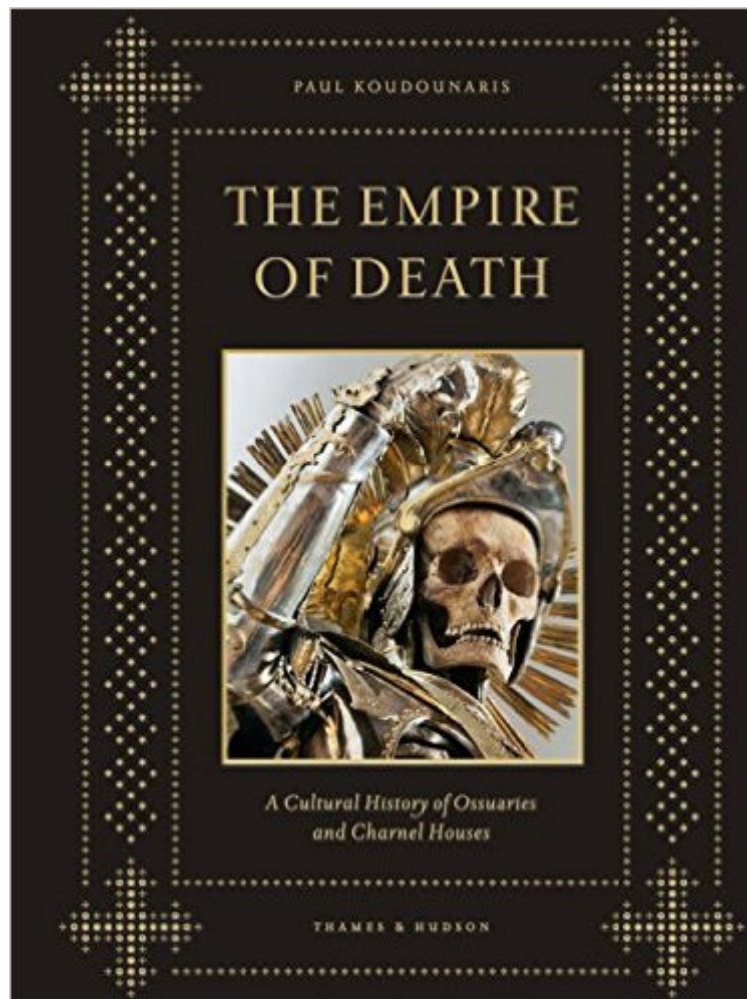


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The Empire Of Death: A Cultural History Of Ossuaries And Charnel Houses



Synopsis

From bone fetishism in the ancient world to painted skulls in Austria and Bavaria: an unusual and compelling work of cultural history. 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. 290 photographs, 260 in color

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As has been testified elsewhere, Paul Koudanaris' exploration of the historical anachronism known as the 'Ossuary' is, firstly, a work of exceptional beauty. His photographs of these places that are entirely morbid to many Western eyes, evincing second & third hand impressions of the Black Death & two World Wars (both times the Horseman of War is followed closely by Death, Plague and

famine: the scarlet fever showing no mercy to the already ravaged nations who fought in the Great War: the terrifying industrialized killing machines employed by the Nazi's to make quick pitiless work of genocide), have far more significance than mere shock. His anthropological investigation into the origins of the Ossuary suggest a deep cultural disconnect that only a small and curious portion of the Western World have managed to plug themselves into. Until the 19th & 20th centuries, the average person had a familiarity with death that was unavoidable. The skull was seen as a symbol of one's resignation to his own mortality. From the late Gothic to the Renaissance to the Baroque, the 'Vanitas' theme of the living man studying the dead to remind himself of life's transience is a constant. The Ossuary can be seen as an architectural and sculptural progression of the Vanitas theme, as well as a solution to a very real problem of city-planning. As plagues and battles raged, and cities continued to grow through the late medieval age, places to bury the dead became harder to find. Graveyards were stacking graves two - three coffins deep. As the distances one was forced to travel in order to bury the dead became untenable, the catacombs were opened and expanded, and the Ossuary was born.

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