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Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures And Spectacular Saints From The Catacombs



Synopsis

An intriguing visual history of the veneration in European churches and monasteries of bejeweled and decorated skeletons. Death has never looked so beautiful. The fully articulated skeleton of a female saint, dressed in an intricate costume of silk brocade and gold lace, withered fingers glittering with colorful rubies, emeralds, and pearls—this is only one of the specially photographed relics featured in *Heavenly Bodies*. In 1578 news came of the discovery in Rome of a labyrinth of underground tombs, which were thought to hold the remains of thousands of early Christian martyrs. Skeletons of these supposed saints were subsequently sent to Catholic churches and religious houses in German-speaking Europe to replace holy relics that had been destroyed in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. The skeletons, known as the catacomb saints, were carefully reassembled, richly dressed in fantastic costumes, wigs, crowns, jewels, and armor, and posed in elaborate displays inside churches and shrines as reminders to the faithful of the heavenly treasures that awaited them after death. Paul Koudounaris gained unprecedented access to religious institutions to reveal these fascinating historical artifacts. Hidden for over a century, Western attitudes toward both the worship of holy relics and death itself changed, some of these ornamented skeletons appear in publication here for the first time. 105 illustrations, 90 in color

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There's a good chance that your average Catholic might have run into relics -- the stray skull, vertebrae or finger bones of some long-dead saint. But complete human skeletons? And dressed up in gold and silver thread, precious gems, bejeweled armor and sumptuous robes? And displayed in

public for all to see? Not so much. In what might be a spectacle worthy of a horror movie, many of these relics, on display in churches throughout southern Germany, are documented by Paul Koudounaris in his extraordinary book, "Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures and Spectacular Saints from the Catacombs." With dozens of full-page, beautifully-composed photographs as well as accessible, well-researched prose, Koudounaris tells the story of the Katakombenheiligen or Catacomb Saints. These were the supposed skeletons of Christians martyrs spirited out of Rome's catacombs from the 1600s to the 1800s, and destined to replace precious relics destroyed during the Reformation. Whether the bones could be proven to be martyrs or even Christian mattered little; the fact that they were Roman was enough to merit a trip beyond the Alps. After their "translation," or travel from Rome, they were cleaned, assembled, dressed, bejeweled, posed and displayed in churches in the German speaking world. Since in many cases the bones came without provenance, they were often named by their new owners -- either after a popular patron of a local monastery, for some virtue (St. Fortunatus, St. Felicity) or their lack of a name (St. Incognito). These town patrons were regularly removed from their niches and paraded through town for veneration, a few even in modern times. Koudounaris brings alive a time when gruesome displays of the dead were an aid to faith.

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