

SCARY STUFF!!! The Bone Mosaic on the Via Veneto

Marc Edward DiPaolo (April 02, 2008)



You haven't lived until you've seen the four rooms of skulls, bones, bone furniture, bone lanterns, and bone wall art at the Church of Santa Maria della Concezione on the Via Veneto.

The next day, Eileen led us to the bus on the outskirts of Siena that led directly to Rome. It would be a three-hour trip all told, and she knew the best subway stops to take to reach our hotel from our point of arrival.

Our hotel in Rome was in a filthy, rather urban area, which made Colin extra nervous. This was one of the few times he had ever left his small-town home in upstate New York, and he was not doing



well at making the adjustment. It seemed to help him, however, when the hotel room was prettier on the inside than it was on the outside. In fact, unlike the Locanda Garibaldi, this hotel had bathrooms in every bedroom, a fact I came to appreciate, as I have a tendency to get up at night and I don't like to travel far.

It was raining that Friday and, since we'd had bad luck with the rain thus far, we didn't want to waste the day. To appease Colin, it was only the two of us on this leg of the journey. Sadly, two hopeless idiots with a map and no sense of direction meant we spent much of the day wandering aimlessly trying to figure out where the Coliseum was. We did manage to stumble on some of the more humble exhibits, such as the Discus Thrower statue in the Roman Baths, but I was annoyed when we met up with some of the others at the Pantheon.

Naturally, Eileen had seen about even major landmarks in the three hours that it took Colin and me to find one. I promised myself that, argument or no argument, we'd be traveling with the expert tomorrow.

Colin chose this point to once again mention the Cabella Cappucin site Joachim had suggested to him. I shrugged. "Why not?" I'm curious. I don't know what the hell it is, but I'm curious."

Eileen overheard the suggestion and found herself curious enough to want to join us. Colin didn't mind because, for once, she was joining his expedition and not the other way around.

We found it within twenty minutes, under Colin's direction, because he refused on two occasions to tell Eileen its exact street.

"I just want to take in the city, Eileen," he said. "If you spend all your time making straight line journeys from point A to point B, you miss out on a lot."

"That's true," I agreed.

"If you spend all day lost, you miss out on more," Eileen countered.

It was only after we arrived that we discovered its true name and location ... the Church of Santa Maria della Concezione on the Via Veneto. We found out later that it was a favorite tourist attraction of the Marquis de Sade. If we had known that before going ... we still would have gone.

From the outside, the building looked like a hundred others in the area. The only thing interesting about it was it had two rows of steps leading diagonally to the entrance on the third floor. Colin headed up the stairs first, with Eileen and me following behind.

Colin went through the door and came back and second later with an embarrassed look on his face. "I need a translation."

I stepped past Colin into a dark, candle-lit room. Standing before me was a balding, bearded monk in a dark brown habit. I felt as if I had been instantly transported back in time more than four hundred years. Somewhere outside, a car horn honked.

The monk silently pointed to a basket by the side of the door, which was labeled with a card that said "Donations" in English and Italian. Figuring it out, I pulled a few bills from my wallet. Not feeling much like doing the math to figure out how many lire equaled a reasonable entry price in American dollars, I just guessed and carelessly dropped a few of the smaller bills into the basket. To this day I have no idea if I was generous, cheap, or about right with what I paid.

The monk gestured down a long, narrow corridor on the right, and the three of us headed that way. I had heard Colin correctly when he used the words "bone," "mosaic," and "tomb" to describe the place we were going, but nothing prepared me for the view I was about to receive. Running along the ceiling of the corridor were patterns made from every bone in the human body. There were rows of diamonds made from sets of jaw bones, flowers designs were made from teeth, and lamps of bone hung suspended from the ceiling by leg bones.



As we walked along the hallway, we looked to our left to see the first of several chambers. In each of these chambers were walls of jawless human skulls stacked one on top of the other – hundreds of them, their empty eye sockets staring at us and through us and away from us. In a second chamber, three complete skeletons dressed in monks' robes stood before another three displays of skulls. In yet another chamber there was a throne made up completely out of what could have been shoulder bones or pelvic bones, or the like. I didn't know enough about the human body to identify what I was looking at, and I was glad for it. I could pretend it was a strange Lego, or something. After all, on one level, what I was looking at didn't appear human at all. You don't mourn a dead thing that doesn't look human. The problem was, I knew it was human.

On the ceiling of the final chamber, the skeleton of a five-year-old child hung suspended from the ceiling, clutching in its hand a giant scythe made of bone. I looked up at it, trying not to think of abortion or crib death or any dead children of any kind. I tried not to think of the Holocaust or of my dead relatives or of my own mortality. I tried not to think of movie stars who I had always loved who had died recently.

"What the fuck is this?" Colin exclaimed. His eyes were wide and a smile of shock, horror and amusement was spread across his face.

"This is the weirdest shit I've ever seen," I said.

"Talk about Slaughter of the Innocents," Eileen whispered.

Colin pointed to a plaque on the wall beside us. "This says these murals are made from the bones of four hundred monks that died during the Black Death."

Well, that explains it, I thought. If I had to live through the Black Death, I'd be crazy, too – maybe even crazy enough to build something like this.

That was when I noticed a sign being held aloft by one of the skeletons. "What you are now, we once were. What we are now, you will be."

"That's the scariest thing I've ever read," Colin breathed.

"Yeah."

Not knowing what else to do, Colin and I laughed off the tension. I remembered back in high school there had been a class trip to see Schindler's List, Steven Spielberg's movie about the Holocaust. Marissa Glasser was angry that some students had laughed during the scenes of torture, wondering what kind of people found such tragedy amusing. I was not one of the ones who had laughed, but I had tried to explain to her at the time that laughter was – at times – a defense mechanism to deal with fear and pain. I found myself proving myself right there in the monastery.

As I laughed at the four hundred dead monks, I felt insanely guilty, but I just had to do it, or go mad with fear and horror. I wondered what Marissa Glasser would have done if she were here with me in the monastery.

Eileen didn't keep her reaction a mystery. "Come on, guys, stop."

"It would be a great pledge location," Colin observed. "Lock the new guy in here overnight and see if he gets through it without trying to escape or kill himself. If he does, then he's in."

"Too right," I said.

We mingled among the dead for at least ten minutes, drinking in the sight of death, talking about how creepy it was, but not finding a way to get ourselves to leave.

"I've had enough," said Eileen. "I'll meet you guys outside."



"No, no," I said. "We're coming."

Before we stepped out the door, Colin and I made sure we got post cards of the displays. We didn't know why we were paying to keep that sight with us, but I know I wanted to remember exactly how it looked in the years to come.

Two days later, when we would see Joachim again, we laughingly reproved him for suggesting it to us in the first place.

"What the hell was that, Joachim?" Colin needled.

"Cabella Cappucin separates the real Catholics from the ones who are just kidding around," he said. "I know a lot of Catholics who walked out of that room as Quakers."

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