

July 6, 2014

Dear David Morrish,

In several countries the scenery is enriched by special museums that are dedicated exclusively to the topics of death, and remembrance. Because these subjects are considered taboo, the existence of such institutions appear to be so forward thinking that one is forced to consider the changes of perceptions regarding death and mourning rituals. Many of these artefacts have originated from private collections and in order to properly understand where these changes are going, we need to examine where and why these collections have started and their meaning.

This research project intends to investigate how society's perceptions towards death has changed over time.

1. How long have you been collecting articles of mourning and mourning affiliated artefacts?

I began collecting animal related artefacts (bones, taxidermy, mummies, etc.) in the 1980's. This collection evolved toward human artefacts (post-mortem photos, bones, and items from the funeral industry). These things were sought out and purchased in earnest after 2005 when I received a mid-career Canada Council Project Grant for this purpose.

2. What do you consider mourning? Is there certain criteria that you acknowledge before collecting?

Mourning is the process one has to go through to come to terms with loss. Grief is all you have if you cannot face the process directly with some understanding. And grief is not a healthy state to remain in for long periods. Mourning helps one get past grief. The Victorians understood this well and codified it in their mourning dress, jewellery and memorial customs.

Items that interest me most are those that clearly acknowledge and/or portray the idea of physical death and dissolution, rather than religion or spiritualism. I like to collect items that are normally hidden from view, which are considered too disturbing, or are simply *not suitable for polite company*. We need to see these things.

3. Do you collect all mourning articles? Or do you stick within a certain era?

I am more interested in artefacts from the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I collect post mortem portraiture mainly, from Daguerreotypes, Ambrotypes, tintypes, CDVs, cabinet cards, to mounted prints. I have a collection of real human skulls and one complete skeleton, old embalming bottles, some casket hardware and ephemera from early casket catalogues, and some human hair jewellery and memorial wreaths. I also have some die-cast scale model hearses, and my natural history collection of animal skulls, bones, etc. is also growing.

4. How do you display your collection and is there anything you will not showcase? If so, why?

All items are on display in a private *Wunderkammer* that I set up in my studio building. It is in two parts; one large divided room is half a formal cabinet of curiosities and half is a collection of death-related items and images, all with 19<sup>th</sup> century decorative overtones; while the other linked space is a vitrine based display area modeled after Klaus Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum* where I can arrange a more disparate collection of detritus and artefacts. I have not yet displayed parts of my graphic forensic lantern slide collection, nor anything that could identify an individual. Public access is by appointment only. The *Wunderkammer* acts as a giant still-life and is a resource for my own art practice from which I create artwork, videos, and prints.

5. In your opinion, should mourning material be showcased in museums? If so, how should it be showcased? (see note\* below)

Yes, absolutely. We are too far removed from the process of death and loss. We need to be re-educated in the rite of passage that was such an everyday part of people's lives in the past. By showing the artefacts associated with this life-event, and with the natural process of death and decay, we are more able to deal with the real-life situations when they occur.

6. In your opinion, is there a difference between public collections of mourning in museums and private mourning collections? If so, what is the difference?

Public collections are often historical, or didactic. Their purpose is to inform without being ghoulish. Private collections often satisfy the personal needs of individuals who are fascinated by death, the macabre, or have interests in Goth or Wiccan subculture or in Victoriana in general.

7. Have you noticed a difference between when you started collecting and the shift of the connotations of death now? Do you notice more of a demand for mourning material to be showcased?

In the past 10 years I have noticed a huge increase in the demand for the death-related things I collect. Therefore, the price of these items has risen dramatically, too. I see more people selling and making death related jewellery, macabre designs in tattoo art, casting and selling real human bones and skulls, and Goth and Steampunk references to Victorian funerary fashion and culture. Skulls have become totally mainstream and are often made cartoonish or cute. They even appear on baby clothes. Film and animation addresses the dead, corpses, skeletons and funeral rites and death with more and more being aimed at children and for mainstream entertainment. Even a bride can be a corpse or a pet dog, a *Frankenweenie*. Zombies are HUGE now....

8. What happens when a collector stops collecting? Should the collection be passed down to younger generations? Or should the collection be divided and given to different museums as it suits their own collections?

All serious collections of any kind need to be preserved. Sometimes there is coherence to a collection that should be maintained by keeping the collection intact. Other collections are more scattered and could be spread to pertinent venues where they make sense. The main thing is to prevent the destruction of these valuable artefacts from our cultural and physical past by people without the *nerve* to face them.

9. In your opinion, do you feel it is important to include objects associated with death and mourning in your exhibitions of community history and life? Please explain your answer:

Yes, absolutely. Newfoundland, for example, has a long and relatively recent tradition of the home-wake, the burial shroud, etc. and we need to show this to the world and remind ourselves that we were once in charge of this major rite of passage. We need to show how we functioned before the funeral industry took over and inflated the process to a commodity.

10. What are the public perceptions of private collectors that you have found in your own collection?

I am not sure what this question is asking.

11. Why have you, and other private collectors chosen to remain separate from a museum?

Actually, I am creating my own museum. I am embracing the trappings of the official institutional collection with labels, provenances, display formalities, and then I am subverting it with the inclusion of fictions, faux-biographies, and apocryphal explanations for mundane objects/artefacts. This is where museology and art intersect. See Kahn and Selesnick for what I mean. Or Mark Dion. Or Mr. Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology. By creating my own museum, I am in full control and do not have to answer to the authorities or public concerns that the official museums are bound to follow.

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