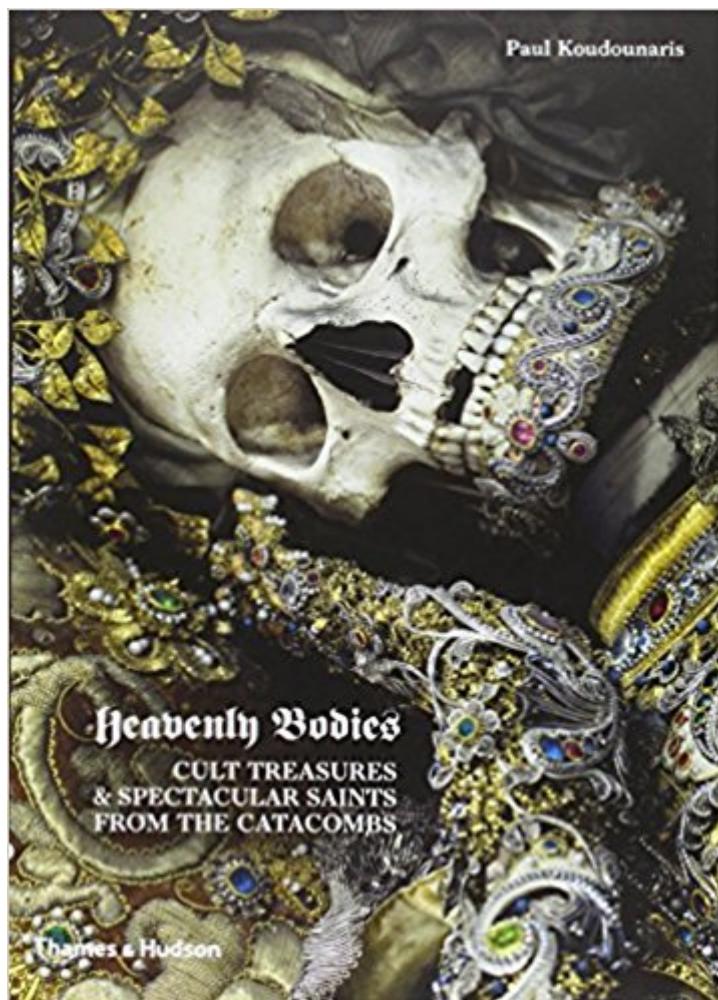


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# Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures And Spectacular Saints From The Catacombs



## 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 as 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

These macabre images elicit a range of contemporary references, from *Goonies* to

bling-laden rappers to artist Damien Hirst’s diamond-encrusted skull.

Wired.com “Perhaps this book is not the originator of the phrase ‘skeletons in your closet,’ but if it were, that closet would be looking quite stupendous.” Dazed Digital “An art historian nicknamed ‘Indiana Bones’ has unearthed a haunting collection of jewel-encrusted skeletons which were hidden in churches in Europe up to 400 years ago.”

New York Post “Photographer and author Paul Koudounaris gained unprecedented access to these so-called ‘catacomb saints’ for his new book *Heavenly Bodies*. Many had never been photographed for publication before. Revered as spiritual objects and then reviled as a source of embarrassment for the Church, their uneven history is marked by one constant: a mysterious, if unsettling, beauty.” CNN.com “A compelling read. . . . The gorgeous photos that accompany the text only reaffirm the opulence of such relics.”

Gothic Beauty “Smart and accessible, *Heavenly Bodies* opens the door to this largely overlooked aspect of the Counter Reformation era.”

Hi-Fructose “Prepared to be amazed by the splendor and beauty of ornamented skeletal remains.”

Palm Springs Life “Koudounaris takes his subject beyond historical rubbernecking and looks at how bodies can move the spirit and why we can’t let go and can’t look away.”

The North Coast Journal “Brings to life a group of long-forgotten Catholic relics.”

Lapham’s Quarterly “Investigates the historic attempts to prescribe posthumous identities to skeletons, specifically those believed to be martyrs.”

Vice.com “Oh, you didn’t know the skeletons of martyrs were unabashedly decked out in gems? Welcome to the club.”

BuzzFeed “Focuses on the life and history of a set of false relics in the Catholic Church.”

The Desert Sun “The images of the catacomb saints are dazzling, almost beyond belief.”

Publishers Weekly “This macabre mash-up of camp and Catholicism features nearly 100 drop-dead images of blinged-out skeletons.”

Passport Magazine “A strange and fascinating book exploring bejeweled Counter Reformation Catholic Skeletons.”

American Society of Jewelry Historians “Magnificently illustrated. . . . An illuminating read for jewelry historians and gemologists alike.”

Gems and Gemology “The photography by Koudounaris is outstanding. He was given access that most tourists touting a camera are not.”

Examiner.com “Koudounaris is one of the first people to photograph the strangely stunning skeletons that have been rediscovered over the years. And while he can’t speak to their authenticity as saints, he does believe that they are extraordinary works of art that deserve to be seen.”

People.com “In telling the story of these extraordinary relics, Koudounaris makes a case for

them as neglected masterpieces of religious art. . . . Koudounaris uncovers a lost world of religious devotion, in which sanctified remains could control the weather, save souls from purgatory, and serve as all-purpose patrons. - Los Angeles Review of Books

Paul Koudounaris received his doctorate from the art history department at UCLA. His previous books include *The Empire of Death and Heavenly Bodies*. He lives in Los Angeles.

From the publisher, Thames & Hudson: "In 1578 a labyrinth of underground burials was discovered in Rome that contained the remains of thousands of individuals assumed to be early Christian martyrs. The bones were disinterred and sent to many Catholic churches and religious houses in German-speaking Europe to replace holy relics that had been destroyed during the Protestant Reformation. Reassembled by skilled artisans, encrusted with gold and jewels and richly dressed in fantastic costumes, the skeletons were displayed in elaborate public shrines as reminders of the spiritual treasures that awaited the faithful after death. For nearly three centuries these *Heavenly Bodies* were venerated as miracle-workers and protectors of their communities until doubts about their authenticity surfaced in the modern era. They then became a source of embarrassment for the Church and most were destroyed or hidden away. The book includes arresting images of more than seventy spectacular jeweled skeletons and the fascinating stories of dozens more, accompanied by rare archive material. This is the first time that some of these incredible relics are both intriguing historical artifacts and masterpieces of artistic craftsmanship in their own right. *Heavenly Bodies* have appeared in a publication, with Koudounaris gaining unprecedented access to photograph in some of the most secretive religious establishments in Europe. Meticulously researched and beautifully written, this is a tour de force of original cultural history with deepest resonances for a modern audience fascinated by visual representations of death." More than a photography book, *Heavenly Bodies* is a beautifully haunting history of the catacomb saints taken from Rome by the Catholic Church centuries ago. Koudounaris does a fantastic job of weaving the tale of the discovery of the skeletons, their issue to the towns that revered them, and the eventual, horrific downfall of their esteem. I found the narrative extremely easy to digest, and fascinating on so many levels. Decidedly Gothic in style and feeling, the catacomb saints have been seen as holy relics, and as disgusting displays of hypocrisy. Wisely refusing to engage in a theological debate, Koudounaris outlines in sympathy the "life" and fate of these exquisitely decorated skeletons. Originally numbering in the hundreds of thousands, these days only a handful of the catacomb saints remain, having been put away in storage or caskets,

destroyed, or vandalised. Many have passed out of history all together. Though macabre, the photography was absolutely gorgeous, and the high-quality paper and print of the book made it an absolute pleasure to look through and observe. Something deeply unsettling reaches out through the pictures, as if they are alive in their intimate, reticulated poses, with Koudoumaris's camera portraying the melancholy and sadness in the silence of their altars. Truly one of the best photography books I have seen in a long while, about a subject exceedingly interesting and unique. Though I wish I could show you every photo, I instead insist you go out and get a copy, because it deserves a slot on your bookshelf. While you're waiting for it to be delivered, you can check out this small Pinterest

board: <http://www.pinterest.com/rollen1000/heavenly-bodies-the-catacomb-saints/>

Originally this was going to be a gift but now that I have it, I can't bear to give it up. I'll have to order another copy. I thought I was pretty well-read on Church History but this forgotten footnote managed to pass me on by and I can only apologize to history by watching for it. The content of this book is thoughtful, well-researched and as beautiful and poignant as one of those rare operas where the characters end tragically and happily at the same time. I see many, many reviewers did an excellent job with the contents so I will try to add something new: This book is meant to last as long as these bones. I have rarely seen so much effort put into making the book itself as beautiful and long-lasting as the subject material. When I was caught in a rainstorm the cover was wet for some minutes before I could wipe it off, but my horror was replaced by astonishment to see the paper still perfect. The high level of clays in the color printing will help preserve the images, of which there 105 (90 in color). The pages are sewn tightly and the cover beneath the dust jacket is tight as a brick. Koudounaris created lovely angles to show the humanity of these bones, and demonstrated by closeups how the living cared for them. At worst they were robbed from their rightful resting place to stand as comforting saints; at best they represented the spiritual lifeblood of the people who saw them, and the nuns who decorated them left marks that have long outlived the commands of those who sought to destroy them out of embarrassment. I'm gushing, I know. But books like this simply do not happen every day. Read the beauty and the heartbreak of the past that is still rippling into our present. I will never look at the Protestant/Catholic dynamic the same way ever again.

A great book that couldn't go wrong for me as it beautifully combines 2 of my interests: photography and history. The photos are beautiful and the text is very informative. The only 'gripe' with my book is that isn't bigger! I'd love a 'jumbo' version of this book.

I had already read his first book, "The Empire of Death" and thoroughly enjoyed the photographs as well as the information. This does not disappoint. The gorgeous photos, the details, the intriguing history behind these jeweled skeletons...if this subject matter interests you, you won't be unhappy with it.

This book is sumptuous. The photographs of the catacomb saints in their finery are breathtaking. The scholarship is also excellent. I came across a recommendation for this book as part of the death-positive movement. I highly recommend it.

This book is amazing. I got it for image reference for drawing/painting. The photographs are both beautiful and bizarre, that perfect mix.

Great photos, fascinating history commentary.

Fascinating, informative, beautiful photos--and interesting and unusual part of history.

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