



No Bones About It

September 1, 2001 By Angelo Ragaza

In the town of Sedlec, an hour outside of Prague, in the Czech Republic, art imitates death as much as it does life. This 19th-century chandelier, which looms portentously over a chapel in the Church of All Saints graveyard, was wrought from the skeletons of some 40,000 people interred there over the course of half a millennium. Legend holds that in 1278, an abbot brought a jarful of soil from Christ's grave in Palestine and scattered it over All Saints' grounds. Properly anointed, the graveyard became a must-do for Christians on the pilgrimage tour of Europe. The many clamoring to be buried in the "holy soil" were joined by countless victims of the *other* plague -- the Black Death -- and by the 15th century, the site held far more human remains than it could accommodate. The first attempt to clear space for newcomers came in 1511, when a monk arranged the bones in decorative pyramids. Cut to 1870, when a woodcarver named Frantisek Rint created this chandelier, which still hangs in the chapel. It's a breathtaking testimony to plague as not only a great equalizer but also an ironic creator of community -- as inexorable in its own time as AIDS is in ours.

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