No Bones About It

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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 abbott 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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