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► Clough is office administrator and association liaison for the ICCFA.

► She is a prolific author, having published five novels, as well as short stories and nonfiction. Her novella, "May Be Some Time," was a finalist for both the Nebula and Hugo awards.



Above, some of the urns on display inside Funeria, in Northern California. Below, author Brenda Clough with Funeria owner Maureen Lomasney outside the gallery.

Visit to an art gallery for cremation urns

Graton, California is a tiny and charming town in Sonoma County, with two superb restaurants, surrounded by famous wineries. Tourist traffic is heavy, especially in the fall when the harvest season and wine pressing is in full swing.

On a side street, just off a major bike trail, is the gallery opened by Funeria, a company that markets cremation urns created by artists working with every conceivable material. According to Funeria owner Maureen Lomasney, the gallery gets a surprising number of walk-ins. Bikers on regional wine tours stop for lunch, drop in to look around, and later come back in their cars.

We toured the space and found a cool display area with soaring ceilings. The urns are displayed like jewels, each on its own pedestal or space. Everything about the display says they are expensive and precious objects of art.

We discussed the future of the funeral industry. Lomasney has plenty to say: Nobody wants embalming any more. Cremation is being seen as a greener alternative, as long as emission standards are met. If crematories can be made more "clean," the future looks bright.

California and the Pacific Northwest are cremation country, she points out. In Marin County, trendsetter of the nation, 80 percent of dispositions are cremations. It's close to that in British Columbia. There's also a powerful interest in the natural burial movement. Cremation is seen as the middle ground between natural death care and the traditional funeral industry.



Environmental groups such as the Nature Conservancy could take a role, she says, envisioning land preserved from development by being dedicated as a scattering site for cremated remains. The funeral industry should start shopping for such collaborators, she says.

As personalization becomes an overarching feature of funerals, funeral homes could evolve from embalming facilities into centers for life passages.

How is Funeria itself doing, I asked?

There was a big, splashy story about it in the Home section of the NY Times this year which had a major impact and led to a show at a New York City art gallery. Entry into the show and the gallery is juried, so the quality of the urns is stupendous. They look like "Art" and appear to be created for people for whom personalization is so key that money is no object. California, the wine country especially, is full of such people. □