

In Death as in Life, a Personalized Space

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

SACRAMENTO
It was nearly a year ago that Lauren Clauson's mother, Rose Karam, moved in with her daughter. Mrs. Karam, a legal secretary who died at 78 after a protracted illness, resides beneath Ms. Clauson's living room window, in an artist-designed ceramic prayer wheel which cycled with stenciled leaves. Having her mother's remains close by — in an urn that celebrates Mrs. Karam's affinity for autumn in New England, where she grew up — is comforting to Ms. Clauson, a 59-year-old transportation planner. "I'll walk by and give mom a spin," she said of the vessel, which is attached to a turntable. "Her presence is here."

The prayer wheel, designed by Christopher Muench, a 47-year-old artist from Bellingham, Wash., is part of an emerging funerary art movement that will reach an apotheosis of sorts when the nation's first art gallery dedicated to cremation urns and other "personal memorial art" opens Jan. 27 in Graton, just outside Sebastopol in Sonoma County, about 65 miles northwest of San Francisco.

The gallery, christened Art Honors Life, will showcase the work of some 40 artists and craftspeople who are collectively pioneering a new aesthetic of death — creating sophisticated vessels



Peter Dado/for The New York Times

CLOSE AT HAND Lauren Clauson, above, keeps her mother's ashes in a prayer-wheel urn in her living room, where she can occasionally give them a spin.

of burnished terracotta, redwood burl, black glass, even biodegradable paper mixed with ashes from ancient oaks that, in terms of sheer artistic ambition, hark back to the ancient Egyptians.

"Art and beauty can assuage anxiety," said Maureen Lomasney, the 58-year-old artist and gallery owner, who started the concept with a Web site called Funeria, and sponsored a juried exhibition in Philadelphia last fall called "Ashes to Art," a kind of Venice biennale for the urn set. "Our goal is to take away fear."

Although artist-designed urns and other objects are still a tiny fraction of the \$11 billion death-care industry, as it is known, the gallery's opening — along with novelty items like wind chimes with built-in cavities, pencils made from cremated remains (roughly 250 pencils per person), diamonds made from ash carbon and brittlestars designed to scatter ashes — reflect the shifting demographics of death and disposition.

A decade ago, 21.1 percent of the Americans who died were cremated; in 2005, roughly 32 percent were. The numbers are steadily rising, with the Cremation Association of North America forecasting a cremation rate of 51.12 percent — more than half Amer-

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A Place on the Shelf

Americans are personalizing their space even after death with cremation urns designed by artists and craftspeople, like the textured steel urn, left, by Tony Knapp of Seattle.



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ica's deaths — by 2025. Located in a charming wine country hamlet, rather than in a cemetery, the new gallery taps into growing consumer demand for "personalization," especially among baby boomers nearing the finish line. Many of the objects, like Offerings, an \$1,100 participatory artwork by Tamar Kern of Newport, R.I., are intended to help mourners with celebratory rituals. For Offerings, Ms. Kern reproduces casts of hands, with what she calls their "unique tracery," in fine silver, as a vessel for scattering or a family heirloom.

"The customization of the culture now includes life-cycle rituals like writing your own wedding vows," said Stephen Prothero, chairman of the religion department at Boston University and the author of "Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America" (University of California Press, 2002). "Today, not having a cookie-cutter life also means not having a cookie-cutter death."

Ms. Lomasney, an artist and photographer, was inspired to start Funeria — a name she invented because it sounded Italian — after reading a 1997 newspaper article about rising cremation rates. She combed Internet sites like urnmall.com and urnexpress.com and was horrified by what she saw. As The Cremationist magazine noted last year, urns have traditionally been regarded as "somber functional containers rather than as an opportunity to express the unique taste and character of the individual."

In terms of artistic chutzpah, Ms. Lomasney may be in a league of her own, representing pieces like the whimsical Urn-a-Matic, a vintage vacuum cleaner that flashes home movies on a built-in screen while playing the 1970s pop song "Seasons in the Sun." This kind of high style doesn't

Cremation is growing and so is the art of the urn, from gems to sculpture.

come cheap: The Urn-a-Matic costs \$1,900 (most of the works are in the \$800 to \$1,200 range and are designed to prescribed dimensions).

Lamont Langworthy, a 76-year-old architect in Sebastopol, purchased a painted copper urn with a "Zen feeling" from Ms. Lomasney, in which he said his own ashes will eventually be housed. "I've always disliked the idea of spending a lot of money to throw people into the ground," he said. "Once you're gone, you're gone. But the best art brings it one level up and blends in with your décor."

Michael W. Monroe, the director of the Bellevue Arts Museum in Bellevue, Wash., and the lead juror for the Philadelphia show, said he initially had trouble taking the "art urn" concept seriously. But he came around. "As the world becomes more computerized, people want to connect with the handmade," he said. The urns, he continued, "give you a sense of aesthetic control over your final presentation. They become self-portraits, in a sense."

The famously conservative funeral industry is catching up.

About 15 years ago, the Batesville Casket Company introduced Dolphins in Motion, an irregularly shaped cast-acrylic urn that, because it was not square or vase-shaped or bronze, was considered an industry breakthrough — particularly given its status as the first commercial urn to break \$2,000. Then, in 2003, anticipating the coming wave of boomer deaths, Batesville hired Nambé, a New Mexico manufacturer of midcentury-inspired housewares and other objects, to create art urns out of its signature metal alloy.

Nambé enlisted two A-list industrial designers — Karim Rashid and Eva Zeisel, both based in New York — to design cremation urns as well as smaller "keepsake" urns and jewelry that allow cremated remains to be divided among family members. The sinuous, stylish urns have done so well that the company is adding to the line, said Joe Weigel, the Batesville marketing director.

"If people started to think about alternatives in advance," Mr. Rashid said, "maybe companies would be compelled to create more interesting — and contemporary — options."

Ron Hast, the publisher of Mortuary Management magazine and the Funeral Monitor newsletter, regards urns like Mr. Rashid's as "an oddity." Nevertheless, he said, they represent several important industry trends, most notably a demand for simplicity that has turned hearse processions, once a staple, into a rarity.

But he remains skeptical. "They're trying to get hundreds of dollars for a ginger jar," he said.

Although art urns are still a specialty item — about 5 percent of all urns sold — the country's nearly 2.5 million annual deaths



Photographs above and below by Peter Dado/for The New York Times; top left, Mel Schocker

LOOKING FORWARD Judith Olney and Marc Bombersbach built a nook for the textured-steel urn called Whimsical by Tony Knapp that will hold his remains.



ART FOR THE AGES Maureen Lomasney, above, in her new funerary-art gallery, Art Honors Life, in Graton, Calif.; among the urns in a Philadelphia exhibition she recently organized were, clockwise from below left, Bed of Roses by Alison Counsell; the Pillow Box clay urn by Darlene Davis; Darin Montgomery's Urn-a-Matic, a vintage vacuum cleaner-style urn that plays "Seasons in the Sun"; Scott Deward's TSG-Keepsake urns; Chama Valley by Laura Bruzese; and Sunny Van Zijst's Aqua Ovaal, made of hand-blown glass; and, top left of page, a bronze dog urn by Joy Kroeger Beckner.



make that 5 percent "a big market share," said Jack Springer, executive director emeritus of the Cremation Association of North America.

Caskets are becoming more personal, too, with white eyelet and gabardine interiors and themed decorative corner pieces, or "life symbols," that can honor a passion, from gardening to bass fishing.

Unlike a casket, however, a cremation urn is often displayed either at home or in a columbarium. "The shoebox in the closet just doesn't do it anymore," said Paul Gelb, the marketing director for Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary in Los Angeles, the Jewish final resting place of Al Jolson, Milton Berle, Jack Benny and Dinah Shore. "Many people want a way to tastefully and discreetly have their loved one near them."

Hillside is in the throes of completing a stream and waterfall system, in which an urn may be placed on an island and then circled by a lighted floating candle transported by the current.

This atmospheric bit of showbiz — which can be accompanied by a catered dinner, fireworks with cremated remains or picnic lunches on horseback with a scattering by plane over a nearby mountain range — reflects modern-day rootlessness, Mr. Gelb said. "If we all lived in the same town we grew up in, cremation would not have taken off the way it has," he said.

Art urns, which he sells, are a contemporary twist on an ancient practice most evident in Egyptian tombs that were stunningly outfitted for the afterlife. In the Roman empire, cremated remains were stored in elaborate urns, often in columbarium-like buildings.

More recently, American colonists carved tombstones with hourglasses, skeletons and other elaborate motifs, while Georgian and Victorian artists crafted now-macabre mourning jewelry, with tiny skulls entombed inside coffin-like crystals and ornate "hairwork," featuring finely wrought miniature scenes in cut hair, which survives decay.

"As our understanding of death changes over time, the forms we use to mourn also change," said Robin Jaffe Frank, senior associate curator at the Yale University Art Gallery and the author of "Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures" (Yale University Art Gallery, 2000). "We're all object-oriented, and we need tangible forms to express our relationship to a person no longer here. Mourning art responds to a deeply felt need."

Many artists, including the noted Washington State glass artist William Morris, have noticed a growing number of requests for cremation vessels among collectors. A few years ago, Mr. Morris was inspired to create a cinerary urn after his own mother's death. After Sept. 11, he created his critically acclaimed Cinerary Urn Series, 70 glass vessels arranged in niches meant to suggest a columbarium or tomb.

"In our society, we don't have objects that deal with death," he said in a telephone interview. "It's a subject that is so ethereal and evanescent. Urns provide a reference point, allowing death to become a little less abstract."

Nestled on a hill amid seven acres of pinot noir in the Russian River Valley, the new house of Marc Bombersbach and Judith Olney, both 53, includes a special niche for the couple's favorite sculpture — an animated figure in textured steel with a playful tilt of the head. Unbeknownst to visitors, the sculpture is a cremation urn for Mr. Bombersbach's ashes. (Ms. Olney has a hand-made paper acorn for herself.) The jaunty artwork reflects Mr. Bombersbach's joyous spirit, his wife said.

"There are a lot of sculptures around, but the fact that this was utilitarian cinched the deal," Mr. Bombersbach said. "The beauty of art is, no one needs to know."

He was quick to add: "But we don't dwell."

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