

# THE WORD

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Neighbourhood Life + Global Style

Belgium Living at Mum's    Lifestyle Asleep on the Job    Fashion Wasted Days  
Design Sleep Keepers    Culture Motel Coma    + **The Car Special**



*The Lazy Issue*

## Laid to Rest

— Why shouldn't funerary objects be a standard part of a designer's repertoire?

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Death tends to be a subject treated flippantly by the design world. The charnel house is routinely raided for its symbolism — you can buy lamp stands in the shape of spinal columns, or a table formed like a coffin. At the recent Design Miami fair, Atelier Van Lieshout presented a winged seat that closed to create a skull-shaped sensory deprivation chamber. Death, and the imagery surrounding it, is co-opted to give works a dark edge — but evidence of death as a simple human experience is barely apparent in most designers' portfolios.

Just because so many of them drive fast and smoke hard, why should designers be more aware of death than the rest of us? We seem to have reconciled ourselves to paraphernalia surrounding death that speaks of another age. We think of caskets in the Queen Anne style (itself a Victorian fantasy of an earlier time), blue and white urns reminiscent of the Ming

era, and statuary with the wistful religious contortions of baroque church carvings.

There is likely something superstitious in our leaving the design of death old-fashioned — it keeps it distant, and turns it into something that doesn't apply to us. Death is the kind of thing that happens to people who kit their homes out with Queen Anne furniture. The idea that we too might die in the style we live was neatly flipped when the artist Joe Scanlon made a spoof IKEA-style DIY coffin last year and offered it for sale at \$27.50.

Much of our reading of the values of other civilizations comes from the representation

they made of themselves in death, from the Royal Egyptians' gilded preservation, to the tombs of the Merovingian lords buried with their horses and trappings of war.

In Europe and North America, our way of death is changing, moving away from religion and the traditions of burial, towards something more secular and possibly more personal. Great Britain has, at over 70%, one of the highest rates of cremation in the world, closely followed by Switzerland, Denmark and Sweden. Having been long frowned on by the Catholic Church, the figures are rising too elsewhere in Europe; in France cremation



rates have gone from 5% in 1989 to an estimate 27% last year. The rise had reached a similar figure in Belgium.

Families often opt to keep the cremated remains in the home, or scatter them in a natural setting, rather than place an urn in a formal columbarium. As yet the inclination towards an expressive, personal style of remembrance is barely reflected by what is on the market.

In the dim, somewhat confused hubbub of the Saint Etienne Design Biennale, it was easy to overlook just about anything that didn't jump about and make a noise, but those who saw the mute glass figure in the vitrine — part space age deity, part tribal fetish — found themselves haunted by it. The work of French product designer Pierre Charpin, the piece looked explicitly like what it was — a container for human cinerary remains, rendered in white glass for a child, black for an adult.

"An urn shouldn't have to look like any other container," explained Charpin, who was inspired by the lack of established ritual surrounding cremation in France. "It shouldn't just be a pretty, elegant, well-designed box. The form of this urn acts a little like the ghost of the departed. It's a presence in the house, an object that functions at once physically and mentally."

Charpin has worked with glass before — he spent a long period experimenting at CIRVA, the international glass research centre in Marseilles — and this strong anthropomorphic figure was the result of a commission from a young glass worker that he'd met during his time there.

Matteo Gonet spent 3 years as a glass blower and head of the "Hot Shop" at CIRVA before setting up a studio in Basel, Switzerland. Two years ago he needed an urn for the

"Death is the kind of thing that happens to people who kit their homes out with Queen Anne furniture."

01. Pierre Charpin's Urn for an Adult and Child  
02. Jean-Baptiste Sibertin-Blanc's Colourful Urn





ashes of a family member. The 28-year-old had never thought about the industry surrounding death and was shocked by the disjunction between the designs on offer and the way that he might want to remember someone he loved. During a trip to Naples, he saw Roman funerary urns made in glass, and it occurred to him that he might be able to bring something on to the market for those looking for an alternative style of commemoration.

From his studio in Basel, Gonet contacted artists and designers for whom he had produced works, and commissioned them to design a glass urn for him to manufacture. As well as Pierre Charpin, the list included artists, craftspeople, glassworkers and former teachers.

While Charpin's is the most immediately haunting of the pieces, 10-piece collection is as diverse as the personalities behind it.

An equally assertive - if more abstract - design was presented by Jean-Baptiste Sibertin-Blanc, creative director of Daum glass. Vividly coloured and clear glass is set around a frame of Corian which in turn has windows cut into it leaving the ashes visible at the heart of the piece. "Cinders are symbolic after the death," explains Sibertin-Blanc, who wanted the design of the urn to reflect the process of mourning. "But maybe after three months I might want to scatter them in a natural setting and keep the object. I wanted to imagine the memory of the person, with all the colours of the glass reflecting on the area inside when the light falls on it. I wanted to make it a very lively piece, not sad, but strong."

Alexis Georgacopolous's urn doubles as a vase. "A funerary urn is a statuary object that you use only once, it becomes an object you never touch or move," he explains. "To give

it another function makes it more visible. It's like a serious joke - the deceased person has a role in the house - grandmother is there to keep the flowers."

Hubert Crevoisier's Funerary Urn for a Couple is a cocoon shaped work in translucent glass in which two chambers are joined. As a nurse, Crevoisier had worked closely with terminally ill patients. Five years ago he gave up a career in palliative care to concentrate on his artwork and this project was strongly linked to his on-going exploration of death and dying. "The complicated things for Matteo was to blow two very similar pieces," explains Crevoisier. "With a very focused eye, you can see some differences and I like that. It's at the junction of the two halves that the piece becomes alive."

After Saint-Etienne, Gonet's prototypes were picked up for exhibitions in the Design-

huis Eindhoven and MUDAC in Lausanne. While flattered by the attention, Gonet's focus is now on getting the pieces to a stage where they can be commercially produced.

Marie Garnier was already exploring modern rites of passage when Gonet approached her. Before the glass design that she produced for him - a pair of oval shapes, one for the ashes, the other for a USB key holding personal information - she created a biodegradable urn hollowed from a loaf of bread. Within the shell of the bread, the ashes are placed on top of acorns and earth, then sealed inside with traditional red wax and ribbon. "The process set in motion by the slow growth of the oak becomes an analogy for mourning," explains Garnier. "What links the two designs is the desire to leave positive traces - the impulses contained in the USB key, and the transformative life created by the acorns."

"The third work - Carbon Copy - uses the ashes as lead for a box of pencils each stamped with the name of the deceased."

Garnier's suggestion of new rituals for death finds echoes in the work of the young British designer Nadine Jarvis. "I'd never set out to design for the funeral industry," explains Jarvis. "This started as a quite abstract-look at cyclical processes and materials that degrade. The original intention wasn't to design urns, but then I started to realize that there wasn't much on offer."

Jarvis' Post Mortem Research project has resulted in three propositions. The first, Rest In Pieces, is a fragile ceramic container tied to the branch of a tree. The string frays over three years or so, eventually leaving it to smash on the ground, scattering the ashes to the wind. The forces of nature are also co-opted in Bird Feeder, in which ashes are progressively released as birds peck at the walls (for Jarvis, the idea that the birds might ingest some of the ashes carries intimations of reincarnation).



04



05

04 Hubert Crevoisier's Funerary Urn for a Couple  
05 Marie Garnier's Take on Urns  
06 Nadine Jarvis' Biodegradable Urn





06



07



08

The third work – Carbon Copy – uses the ashes as lead for a box of pencils each stamped with the name of the deceased. While some might find this the most disconcerting of the three works, for Jarvis, it was the most personal. “The pencils pay homage to my granddad,” she explains. “He was German and I couldn’t communicate with him, so I’d write letters which he’d translate.”

In 1997 Maureen Lomasney read an article in the San Francisco Examiner about the rising cremation rates in California. “Mortality wasn’t a subject pressing on my mind,” she recalls. “I started thinking of what people were making to put the ashes in – surely there must be a whole new group of artists and artisans making beautiful urns for people?” After discovering almost nothing on the market, Lomasney decided that she could do something to stimulate creative work in what she felt sure was an emerging area.

In 2000 she solicited entries from art school and ateliers for the first juried international exhibition of urns, reliquaries and funeral art. The response – both from artists and from the buying public – led her to create Funeria, a funerary art business that now has a dedicated gallery in Sonoma, and a Biennial in San Francisco.

“Our orders have been quadrupling every year in the past three years, so I’d say we’re on a very good path,” explains Lomasney. “Since the gallery opened there have been many more requests for specially commissioned work.” Clients visit from as far away as New York, often returning time and again to find the right piece.

Lomasney suggests that Funeria offers a glimpse of practices that might become commonplace elsewhere in the world in coming decades. “The Bay Area is where natural childbirth took hold prior to doing so in the rest of the country,” she explains. “Some-

thing about the West Coast liberates thinking about all stages of our lives and people are looking for opportunities to enrich those stages.”