

The Bones Within: or the Story of the Catrina

As most here know, my husband and I have recently returned from Mexico. The most common reaction to this is, “Are you nuts?” And, yes, there is a chance that is true and I bet you don’t want us to tell you what the weather is like where we were. We don’t want to know what the weather is like where we were. I’m sure I could build character in sun and warmth just as well as I can in gloom and cold. But, we’re back and, if I didn’t miss the weather, I missed the church and I missed all of you.

This is the fifth year we’ve gone to the same town in Mexico and each year we see, in every artist’s gallery, in every shop, skeletons. Skeletons on T-shirts, skeletons in paintings, skeletons as figurines in porcelain or plastic, skeletons in dioramas that depict them doing everything from playing in a band, to eating in a restaurant, to working in an office (complete with miniature PC’s), even going to the dentist. The most common examples of these skeletons are of a man and woman, she in a large flowered hat, he in a black suit. We learned they were called Catrinas (Catrines for the man) but we didn’t know that they were in a separate category from all the other skeletons. We thought they probably had something to do with the Day of the Dead, November 1st, but that was about all we thought

about them. I found them a little more than creepy and have never had any intention of buying them.

Each year we go to Mexico, I learn something new. This year we took a tour of a neighboring town, Guanajuato, where we went to the Diego Rivera museum, a museum to one of Mexico's most well known artists. There we discovered the origins of the Catrinas/Catrines, and I quote good old Wikipedia:

La Calavera Catrina ('Dapper Skeleton', 'Elegant Skull') or *Catrina La Calavera Garbancera* is a 1910–1913 [zinc etching](#) by the Mexican printmaker, cartoon illustrator and [lithographer José Guadalupe Posada](#).^[1] She is offered as a satirical portrait of those Mexican natives who, Posada felt, were aspiring to adopt European aristocratic traditions in the pre-revolution era. *La Catrina* has become an icon of the Mexican Día de Muertos, or [Day of the Dead](#).

The zinc etching depicts a female skeleton dressed only in a hat, her *chapeau en attente* is related to European styles of the early 20th century. The original leaflet describes a person who was ashamed of their indigenous origins and dressed imitating the French style while wearing lots of makeup to make their skin look whiter.^[2] This description also uses the word *garbancera*, a nickname given to people of indigenous ancestry who imitated European style and denied their own cultural heritage.^{[3][4]}

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Posada was an older contemporary of Diego Rivera. Rivera put a Catrina in a famous mural and thereby assured her immortality. It is an image that was deeply influenced by the primary cultural heritages of Mexico, harkening back to an

ancient Aztec goddess, Mictecacihuatl, keeper of the dead, who was honored in a month long ceremony of reverence for the dead. When the Spanish conquered Mexico, they brought to this culture of the dead the medieval Christian image of the Dance of the Dead, which was widespread in Europe, particularly after the great plagues had swept that continent. It was meant to remind people of the shortness of life and the common fate that awaited all. This fusion resulted in the ceremonies that mark the Day of the Dead.

Commentators have remarked on two aspects of the widespread use of skeleton images in Mexico. The first is that, in this culture, death is approached with a sense of humor. Catrinas are cheerful characters, smiling, dancing, greeting people. The second is Posadas use of the skeleton as social satire. The image of the Catrina with her fancy hat, and often fancy dresses, over her bones depicts the rich as vainly trying to cover up their essential emptiness with ostentatious display.

So, in one image, Posada conjured something that speaks to the deep fears of every person. In the first place, the Catrina as a symbol of the desire of indigenous people to pass as European, speaks to the deep self-hatred that results from being told one is inferior. Indigenous people trying to become white can resonate with all of us who feel that our origins are not quite good enough, the shame many feel who accept the definition of themselves as less

than those they have been told are superior to them. Think here of hair straightening and skin bleaching, of 'nose jobs', think of speech therapy to remove traces of a regional or ethnic accent.

Following from this sense of being second class, the Catrina's whitened bones and rich clothes cannot cover her and so speaks to everyone's fear of exposure, of being revealed to be an imposter, a fake, a fraud. I imagine many of us have faced that fear. We might recall dreams common to many people, dreams in which they appear in public in only underwear, or less, or dreams in which people face a class or an audience or a congregation, having not prepared, no homework, no lesson, no sermon. I know I can relate to those dreams.

The fear that we are frauds, that we will be found out, that we are essentially as empty as a skeleton is a fear that can blight each success. People handle it in different ways, from self-promotion to self-deprecation, but, in a very competitive society, it is a natural response. After all, when we are done with school, where these fears often originate, how can people be ranked? Do we get A's in social acceptance? Are we the best in our field and just how could that be measured? If we aren't the best, are we nothing? How do we come to value ourselves just as we are? We are often much better in

assigning worth and dignity to others than we are at giving it to ourselves.

We are all good at dismissing reassurance as to our own worth. “You’re just saying that because you’re my friend/spouse/parent.” And so, the fear that we will be shown up, publicly, features in our interactions, by night as well as by day.

And lastly, to move from the particular symbol of the Catrina to the symbolism of skeletons in general, these images are meant to remind us of two things; first, that no matter what our power or beauty or wealth or fame in this life, we all come to the same fate in the end. The common phrase, “you can’t take it with you,” is not only an invitation to kick up our heels now but also a reminder of the limits of our power to stave off everyone’s ultimate end. Even though we can often feel immortal, I know I do in the sense that I can’t imagine not being in the world, each of us also knows, at least in our minds, the fear of death. It is a fear that our culture has buried (ho,ho) with bad jokes and embalming and talk of a better world, one which strongly resembles this one but with a better climate. This is a relatively recent development, one that would have been foreign to past ages. It makes sense that, as medical and hygienic advances increased people’s life expectancy, the dread of death could be delayed until it is almost absent. In times and places in which death was a more frequent visitor, it was impossible to ignore. The symbol of the skeleton was used commonly, not only in Mexico but

throughout Europe and in the colonies of the New World, since all the four horsemen of the Apocalypse were making regular rounds then. Many have probably seen the image of the skull that decorates old New England headstones in graveyards. Skeletons as art, the ones we saw everywhere in Mexico, are a reminder of this tradition.

Skeletons, death, as art is still unnerving to me. And yet, it reminds me of more than that we are all mortal. It reminds me that art is made good, not by complete freedom, but by the pressure of limits. A visual artist is limited by the paint or clay or pixels that he or she uses. A choreographer creating a dance is limited by the strength and flexibility of the human body. A poet is limited by the words and sounds and meanings in the language in which he or she writes. Frustrating as limits are in enabling us to bring forth a vision, it is also these limits that makes the work possible. If everything were possible, we would be left without the framework that each work requires to give it shape, like, you might say, a skeleton gives all of us shape. Our time on earth is a limit, something that shapes our lives. We are, each of us, a work of art, one that we can shape and refine as long as we draw breath.

Ash Wednesday, last Wednesday, is, like the Day of the Dead, our own cultural reminder of our mortality. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, is what we are told

on that day. For us U-U's, who have no creed, no set form of belief, we have always left questions about death and the possibility of an afterlife to each person and, traditionally, we have concentrated more on life than on death. Ash Wednesday is not usually part of our calendar and yet, as part of the ecumenical services that are being celebrated in Central Square, I went to the service held at the Community Church. It was not a service as such; it was a discussion and I enjoyed it thoroughly. Through the discussion, I saw a different way to observe Lent.

I had always thought of Lent as an empty ritual, one in which the idea of sacrifice was trivialized and which was part of the life-denying, joy killing, puritan aspect of religion that I so disliked, right up there with whips and hair shirts. So I was grateful for the people at the Community Church for bringing Lent alive for me. One person said she had read about observing Lent by giving up something that would help others, not just giving up something for oneself. She gave as an example giving up using plastic products, such as plastic containers and bags, for forty days. We shared the reading from Pope Francis that we have just shared today as examples of giving up negative, unhealthy thoughts and ways of being, a renunciation that could improve ourselves and our relationships. But the most thought provoking statement for me came from the person who observed that, if we can give something up for forty days, it means we are capable of change. After

all, if we can live without something for forty days, we should be able to live without it for forty one days, and then forty two, and so on into the future.

Giving up something, no matter what, focusses our minds on time, the time that we are willing to do something different. It reminds us that the past is different from the present, that the future will be again different from what we see now. It reminds us that we are limited in our time and so our time here becomes more important. Ashes, skeletons, all those devices can remind us of our mortality but it also reminds us that we are all the same under our clothes, however fancy or plain, reminder that all people have the same bones, the same fears, the same desires, the same needs. It is also a reminder that, over time we all change and that we can direct that change. It tells us that we all need to do some changing, or change will be in charge of us. What do we want to give up? What do we need to give up? What Lenten renunciation, what sacrifice, will make us more alive to the world, more able to be at peace with ourselves? What change do we need to make for good, for our own good, for the good of everyone?