

How have the catacombs of Paris become art?

Beneath the bustling streets of Paris lies a vast labyrinth of tunnels filled with the remains of over six million people which dates back to the 18th century. Officially these were created as a solution to the city's overcrowded cemeteries, the Catacombs have since become a symbol of death and history. They are not only a historical monument but also an ever evolving canvas for artists throughout the centuries. Since their transformation into ossuaries in the late 18th century, the tunnels have inspired various forms of artistic expression, driven by changing historical contexts and the shifting subcultures of Paris. The artistic journey of the catacombs reflects the broader cultural, political and social developments of Paris, from the revolutionary fervor of the 18th century to the countercultural movements of the 20th and 21st centuries. Today they still attract tourists but also have a thriving underground culture of artists and explorers within the forbidden spaces that lie beyond the official tour paths. My research will be focusing on this ever-evolving canvas for artists through history and exploring the nature of our artistic expression. Why do we feel the need to create masterpieces in such a somber, unhygienic, unsafe, illegal space?

To understand the Catacombs' rich history, it is crucial we go back... way back. Before ever becoming the catacombs, the underground tunnels were part of a vast network of limestone quarries dating back to Roman times. Paris was wealthy in natural resources including, sand, sandstone, gypsum, clay and limestone. These were mined and used for building at the surface, later abandoned and restarted in the Middle Ages. Insufficient regulations by the authorities meant they became more popular, too accessible and the dry stone support pillars became inadequate. Due to the many disastrous cave-ins and entire buildings falling through the earth, understandably the Paris quarries had to be closed down in 1776.

An extensive underground ossuary- the story of the catacombs as we know them today begins in the late 18th century when Paris faced a severe problem of overcrowded cement. As burial grounds became a health hazard, with corpses overflowing from the graveyards, contaminating the air and water supply. The cemetery of 'Les Innocent' was especially notorious for this and became a source of disease and discomfort for residents nearby. Therefore the city decided to relocate the remains to these abandoned limestone quarries beneath Paris. This process began in 1786 and took roughly 12 years, the bones were transported at night, accompanied by priests chanting prayers.

'The Revolution Of The Dead', as discussed in 'Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris, 1780-1830 by Erin-Marie Legacey', refers to the profound transformation in how the dead were treated, understood and represented in Paris during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This shift was part of a broader societal and cultural upheaval that included political revolution, urban expansion and changing attitudes towards death and the body. Throughout the Revolution, the city's cemeteries became key symbols of political and social change as there was a rise of the idea of public health and hygiene. During the Revolution, the dead, particularly those who died in the name of revolution, were reimagined as symbols of martyrdom and revolutionary sacrifice. The act of reburial in the catacombs was often linked to a rethinking of how the state could control memory and legacy. Symbolically the catacombs became a place where the dead were not just buried but memorialized and incorporated into the revolutionary narrative. The bodies of

the “old regime” were treated with less reverence, while the remains of the revolutionaries or those who died for the new republic were treated with a greater sense of symbolic power. Therefore the Revolution extended into the realm of death, with the spaces and rituals of burial becoming a tool of political messaging. In all, the “Revolution of the Dead” was both a literal and symbolic reshaping of the afterlife, an attempt to transform death from a primal or religious experience into something publicly managed, politically charged, and culturally significant. Additionally, Alberto M. Piedra (2018) states, “Little doubt remains among scholars as to the dechristianization of France during the French Revolution.”, which explains the rationality of this hygienic control, and the evolution of Paris taking such a decision as to move millions of buried bodies, even as it goes against religiousness. It was now as protection against outbreaks of disease like the plague and cholera due to the collective growing understanding of contagion. Furthermore, given that so many of the bodies found in the catacombs were part of the revolution and of a crucial historical period of movements for French society, the symbolism and correlation between their burial in the catacombs and the rebellious nature of cataphiles, it is certainly interesting, symbolic and not to be overlooked.

The historical significance of the Catacombs extends beyond being a mass grave. Later, in World War Two, both the French Resistance and occupying German forces utilized these underground passages for strategic purposes, as a secret meeting spot, hiding place, storage, bunkers, adding yet another layer to their historical narrative. One of my favourite art pieces in the Catacombs, which isn't as famous, is a charcoal drawing dating back to 1848 of a National Guard and an insurgent in front of him. The only video I have found documenting it is in a French media ‘Brut, with Axolot (2020)’. This multi generational wealth of conserved art, all cohabitating in such a dense space is truly fascinating and enriching.



Beyond this rich historical narrative, the Catacombs of Paris have become a hub for an illegal yet thriving art scene. Officially, only a small portion of the Catacombs is open to the public as a museum. The rest is off limits and accessing these restricted areas is illegal. However, this has all but deterred a subculture of urban explorers, artists and history enthusiasts. Within these hidden sections of the catacombs is where the art culture truly flourishes. In the 19th century, began the Romantic movement, with its fascination for death, decay, and the sublime, which undeniably played a significant role in shaping the artistic perception of the Catacombs during this period. Famous writers like Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire drew inspiration from the city's dark and forgotten corners, including its underground passages. The arrangement of bones, originally intended for practicality, took in a new meaning as visitors interpreted it as a form of art. People began to visualise the catacombs as a gallery of death. The late 20th century captured the emergence of the 'cataphiles', a subculture of urban explorers who ventured into the illegal sections of the catacombs as a way of escaping the world above and from the conventional norms of society. The political and social climate of the 1960s and 1970s, characterised by student protests and countercultural movements, influenced the cataphile community. The catacombs offered a unique and isolated space for their expression away from the watchful eyes of the authorities. Graffiti artists painted walls of colourful tags, political messages and abstract designs, turning the dark tunnels into hidden galleries. The underground art of this era was raw and rebellious, reflecting the spirit of the times. The 21st century showed the

catacombs becoming even more diverse and sophisticated, whilst also now hosting underground art exhibitions, film screenings, concerts, real bars, and of course all illegally.

Craving a life within the narrow walls of the catacombs seems aniliating to me, therefore I did some research and through 'Kevin Bingham (2020) Rethinking Utopia: the search for 'topias' in the Paris catacombs', I found some clarifying analysis of why so many people feel the need to participate to such a movement.

"As Sloterdijk argues, although people have experimented with new forms of life across many centuries and cultures, in present modernity people have come to realize that they can determine their own worlds rather than experience them being closely regulated by overarching political, cultural or economic parameters. What this means is that Sloterdijk celebrates the idea that waiting for freedom in the all-liberating utopian sense is not necessary when freedom in many different forms is attainable already."(Bingham, p527)

"In a nutshell, then, it is argued that reterotopia, heterotopia and scotopia are three 'topias' that have come to replace utopia in present modernity. Even if the experience is only ever transient and short-lived, each play an important part in allowing people to discover performativity, locate a sense of collective consciousness, feel intense pleasures and pains, and, above all, experience the euphoria of freedom."(Bingham, p544)

Today, the catacombs remain a dynamic, evolving space for art, shaped by the historical legacy of Paris and the ongoing dialogue between the living and the dead. In essence, it is a testament to the human urge to create, explore, and leave a mark, even in the most unexpected and forbidden places. The Catacombs have been kept alive against all odds and continue to challenge norms, in the hands of those brave enough to venture into the depths. The story of the Catacombs of Paris is far from over, and it will seize to amaze us.

Referencing

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