



DAMIEN HIRST'S "FOR THE LOVE OF GOD", 2007
PLATINUM, DIAMONDS AND HUMAN TEETH (17.1 X 12.7 X 19.1 CM)
© DAMIEN HIRST, PHOTO: PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOCIATES LTD

THE SKULL – A REMINDER OF THE TRANSIENCE OF ALL THINGS

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NOW WE CAN SEE THEM EVERYWHERE: SKULLS DANGLING ON LADIES' DÉCOLLETÉS OR GRACING DELICATE FINGERS AND EVEN ADORNING NATIONAL COSTUMES - LIKE THE DIRNDL DRESS CORA SCHUMACHER WORE AT MUNICH'S OKTOBERFEST IN 2008, CAUSING QUITE A STIR IN THE MEDIA. BUT IS THIS REALLY DECORATIVE?



GREEN GALUCHAT BRACELET BY DEGRISOGONO, COMPLEMENTED BY A BLACKENED WHITE GOLD SKULL PAVÉD WITH 138 GRAY DIAMONDS (3.30 CT), 40 BLACK DIAMONDS (0.50 CT) AND 2 MOONSTONES (1.20 CT)



"PIRATE" RINGS BY ERICH ZIMMERMANN, 750 GRAY GOLD AND 925 SILVER, EACH WITH A BRILLIANT-CUT DIAMOND ON THE SKULL



"SKULL" CUFFLINK BY PE GIERS, 925 SILVER

DO MEN FIND THIS ATTRACTIVE? Or, vice versa, are women turned on by a strong masculine hand sporting a ring with this vanitas symbol? Our opinions on jewelry "adorned" with skulls may differ, but we should also be aware that their symbolism goes far beyond trendy gothic or metal fantasies.

In the past few years, more and more modern jewelry designers have been integrating the skull as a vanitas motif in their creations. Pe Giers, for example, complements her rings with skulls and bones as a symbol of anarchy – in the sense of man's liberation from all constraints. "Carpe diem – Seize the day, enjoy life" is what she wants to tell the wearers of her jewelry which also expresses the realization that our existence is not infinite. One of the most well-known wearers of her rings is Udo Lindenberg, a German rock musician who also addresses both the light and the dark sides of life in many of his songs.

Jewelry designer Erich Zimmermann has a similar view. In his pieces he uses the skull, this most common vanitas motif and symbol of death, to depict the entire span of life from birth to death, thus expressing the idea of transience, both of our own existence and of all worldly things. In his opinion, the non-material should be more valuable than the material. By lending his skulls a smile and complementing them with gemstones – thus adding something positive – he tries to make us more aware of the fact that death is simply part of life. For Zimmermann, skulls have nothing creepy or cruel about them. Instead, he considers his skull jewelry to represent a positive way of dealing with transience and mortality.

A HISTORICAL REVIEW

The skull has been used as a symbol for hundreds of years. Today, in our occidental culture, the skull is a common graphic symbol showing a human cranium, usually depicted from the front, either with or without the lower jaw, and often complemented with two crossed thighbones underneath or behind it. In general, it is used to symbolize or warn us of death or physical danger but it also represents the transient nature of human life in contrast to our immortal soul, as well as the entire physical world in contrast to spiritual values. Skulls were already used as a symbol of transience at the time of Renaissance Humanism (15th and 16th centuries) and the Pietism movement (17th and 18th centuries). Referred to as vanitas motif back then ("vanitas" meaning "emptiness" or "futility" in Latin and referring to the meaninglessness of earthly life and the transient nature of vanity), the skull was used to express the idea of the transience of all earthly things. Vanitas motifs, above all the skull, show us that we as humans have no control over life. The increase in vanitas motifs since the Renaissance period reflects the conflict between the Middle Ages and the Modern era, the dilemma between human humility and human self-awareness which reaches its peak in the Baroque period. Starting from the late 18th century, man's liberation from humility was gaining the upper hand. Since about 1760, overcoming the vanitas was a central issue of an advanced bourgeois cul-

ture, and older vanitas motifs were often attributed to a less esteemed popular culture.

BURIAL PRACTICES AND PAINTED SKULLS

The ossuary in the Austrian village of Hallstatt houses approximately 1200 skulls, about 700 of which are painted. The local custom of skull painting dates back to about 1720, although the ossuary had already been used as a final resting place for the skeletal remains of the deceased since the early 17th century. Contrary to what had long been supposed, the custom of storing the skulls and bones in the ossuary did not develop due to a lack of burial space in the cemetery but instead has its roots in the tradition of individual families. This is substantiated by the fact that not everybody was exhumed but only the members of certain families. The deceased were buried and usually remained in their graves for 15 to 20 years. Then their skulls and bones were taken out of the grave, cleaned by the gravedigger and left outside to bleach in the sun. The skulls, which often indicate the owner's name and profession on the front, as well as the date of birth and death, were painted according to the painter's ideas, but certain styles were characteristic for certain periods. Today, only very few skulls are entombed in the ossuary and only on special request, but irrespective of the denomination of the deceased because both Catholic and Protestant Christians are buried on the same cemetery.

SKULLS AS WORKS OF ART

Although in our day and age, vanitas motifs are largely dissociated from their religious background, they still exist, especially in certain youth subcultures whose members often use skulls and other symbols of death to express their protest against the prevailing social system or as a means to provoke.

One of the most famous skulls could be seen from November 1 to December 15, 2008 in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum: Damien Hirst's diamond-studded skull entitled "For the Love of God", probably his most well-known piece. This skull is considered one of the most expensive works of a living artist and was sold in 2007 for 75 million euros. It is set with 8601 diamonds and reflects the conflict between wealth, life and transience in a very ironic manner. Damien Hirst, a British artist, is considered as the enfant terrible of the art scene since he shocked the world in the early 1990s with animal bodies preserved in formaldehyde. ■■■■

EXAMPLES FROM PATRIK MUFF'S CURRENT COLLECTION: PORCELAIN PENDANTS DESIGNED FOR THE NYMPHENBURG PORCELAIN MANUFACTORY

SKULL RING DESIGNED BY DANIEL HILLER, 750 YELLOW GOLD

