



NFE showcases creativity and customer focus in coffin design

One of the most striking features of the National Funeral Exhibition (NFE) is always the diverse range of coffins on display, and 2019 was no exception. Innovative designs in wood, wicker, bamboo, willow, wool and many other materials took centre stage at the show, with exhibitors showcasing a variety of methods of personalising coffins to meet increasing consumer demand.

The centerpiece of Colourful Coffins' stand at NFE was a stunning black and white Purity American casket, covered with thousands of Swarovski elements crystals and delicate lacework. Nearly half a million crystals were applied by hand, taking days and months to complete, and CEO Mary Tomes was delighted with the reception: "It had such a wow factor that everyone wanted to see it and take photos, it was just fantastic."

"Of course, once they were on our stand they could see all the fabulous other products and designs we were showcasing, including our Glitter coffins and our gorgeous Angel dresses and suits for children. It was a terrific show, we were busy all the time and had so many compliments and such great feedback that we were proud to be part of such a wonderful occasion."

Just a few steps away, photos were also being taken of the beautiful Living Coffin, created by Somerset Willow.

Says Anthony Johnson from Somerset Willow: "Hand crafted using natural and biodegradable willow, the Living Coffin is made utilising revolutionary



techniques. Each willow wand is kept alive using a clever system enabling the continued growth of the willow and its leaves. The special system used requires only minimal maintenance and care up until the time of its use. The Living Coffin can shoulder a maximum weight of 25 Stone (160kg) and is suitable for green burial and standard burial."

Sustainability also lay at the heart of the LifeArt Coffins stand in Hall 2. Designed to reduce cremation emissions, the coffins are made from a patented envirowood technology. Simon Rothwell, of Queen's Innovation Award-winning company Flexmort, which has partnered with LifeArt coffins, said: "The LifeArt coffins deliver exceptional strength and full coffin functionality. They come in brilliant timber finishes, evocative designs or the personal touch of a customer's own design - all with low emissions and the choice of wooden or plastic handles."

For all of the exhibitors, the show offered a chance to let funeral directors get up close to their new designs.

For JC Atkinson, which marked a decade of partnership with wool coffin manufacturer Natural Legacy during the show, NFE represented a valuable opportunity to showcase new products and new partnerships. Commercial Director Greg Cranfield said: "NFE is an incredibly important event for us, as we use it as the launch platform for the bi-annual JC Atkinson product brochure which, this year, has grown to 200 pages, putting a wider range of choice and personalisation opinions directly into the hands of funeral directors."

The star attraction at...NFE 1819!

How fear of death in the nineteenth century sparked a boom in safety coffins

Despite all of the innovation in coffin design at NFE, one particular product was very definitely missing from the range of coffins on display - the safety coffin. However, if the show had been held a hundred years ago it may very well have been a centrepiece of the show. Nick Britten, of Wordsmith Communication, explores this curious phenomenon.

"Being buried alive is no laughing matter and the fear of it - called taphophobia - reached such a common state in the late 19th century that it sparked a boom industry in coffins designed to rescue folk who found themselves in the unfortunate situation of waking up six feet under.

"The inventions were highly imaginative and contained a varying array of tactics to help raise the alarm. Take, for example, the 'Improved Burial-Case', details of which are available on the United States Patent and Trademark Office website.

"The coffin was designed by Franz Vester, from New Jersey, in July 1868 and contained a tube placed directly over where the head lies, allowing the 'deceased' (or 'not deceased anymore'), to open part of the lid and climb up a ladder. This had the added benefit of people being able to see down it, to check if the person was alive. It also contained a cord linked to a bell over ground that the confined person could ring if they were too weak to climb out.

"It is something that 19-year-old Angelo Hays, who went for a ride on his motorcycle in 1937, could have done with. Having crashed his bike, his facial injuries were severe and he showed little sign of life so, death presumed, he was buried three days after the accident.

"Fortunately, due to an insurance wrangle, his body was exhumed two days after he was buried and found to be warm. Further tests showed he was breathing, and he went on to make a complete recovery. It transpired that his body had put itself into a deep coma to cope with the trauma of the accident.

"Hays went on to invent a new type of security coffin - as well as an oven, refrigerator and hi-fi cassette player. Strangely, though, there was little mention of anything to help you get out of the coffin, raise the alarm or, indeed, how you would get the oven to work and what you might put in it.

"Octavia Smith was not so lucky. In 1889, suffering depression from the death of her son in infancy, she fell into a deep coma-like state. Presumed dead, she was buried, yet soon after others in her town began to fall into similar "comas", only to wake up a few days later. The condition was found to have been caused by a tsetse fly bite. Smith's husband, fearful that his wife had suffered the same (correctly so as it turned out), had her exhumed. He found

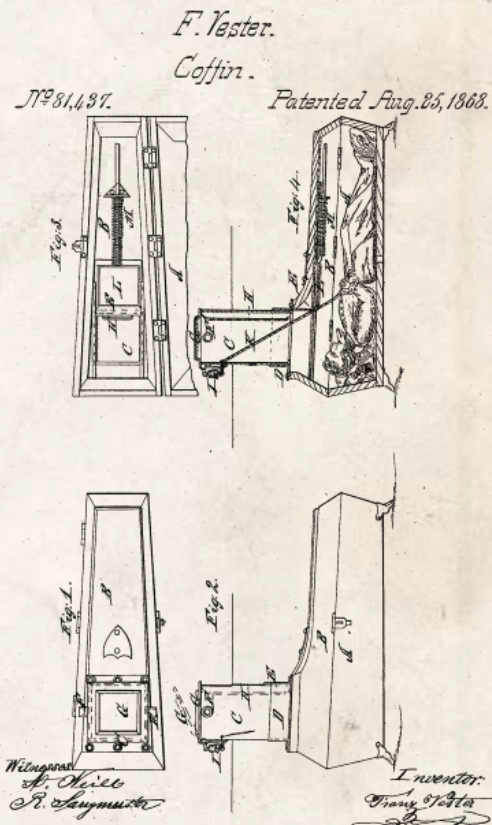
the coffin lining had all been ripped away and Octavia's fingernails were all bloody. Her face was frozen, contorted in terror.

"But why were people buried alive? Added to the rather unscientific standards compared to today of pronouncing life extinct, mass epidemics such as cholera outbreaks meant there were far more "dead" people than the authorities could cope with. Mistakes were bound to be made.

"Down the years, the idea of "safety coffins" has occupied the minds of many inventors, with a wide range of potential solutions. There was the glass coffin, allowing someone on the outside to see if breath had clouded the glass. There were air and feeding tubes, a coffin allowing the person to release a coffin lid via a lock, raiseable flags, fire crackers and other pyrotechnics.

"Lots of alarm-raising variations have also been tried, and have failed, due to the natural movement of corpses setting off bells linked to string tied to parts of the body. Designs featuring open tubes suffered from insects and rainwater getting into coffins.

"There's very little evidence, either way, to prove the success of the use of safety coffin designs and they have largely died a death with improvements in identifying death. However, while safety coffins largely died out many



decades ago, the do occasionally pop up - and as recently as 1995. Designed by Fabrizio Caselli, the modern safety coffin included all mod-cons from an emergency alarm, intercom and torch, to breathing apparatus and a heart stimulator and monitor!"

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