

You CAN'T Take It With You

PACKING FOR THE FINAL JOURNEY

By Carol Milano



▲ Doug Colvin's commissioned "Money Casket" which has made the rounds to various trade shows, displays \$643 in uncirculated coins and bills.

Doug Colvin, a coin collector in Texas, appreciated all forms of currency. In thinking ahead, he hired a casket designer to craft one for him that would be covered

in and lined with new coins and bills. Colvin lent it to the National Museum of Funeral History in Houston, Texas, "to be showcased for visitors to see that, when you talk about

money, you might as well take it with you!" recounted Genevieve Keeney, museum president and curator.

While Colvin's design is distinctive, people have been choosing objects for their final journey throughout human history. At a Cro-Magnon site estimated to be 28,000 years old, "three extensive remains were found together in garments decorated with thousands of hand-carved ivory beads," said Keeney. "They were also buried with mammoth tusks."

In the earliest of known graves, "items were selected to serve the deceased in the next world, such as pottery," Keeney said. Ancient Chinese kings have been found with stone toilets or jade weights in the form of a bear, an honored animal. "Some Asian cultures also included money in case a monetary token was needed for any tolls to enter the afterlife. The most influential ancient Egyptians and Vikings were buried with objects that symbolized their servants."

Prominent Figures

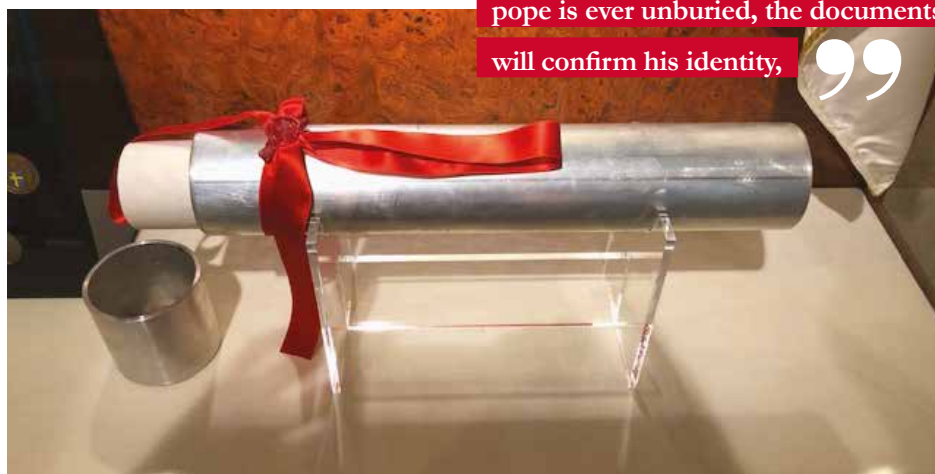
Popes are buried under a white face veil and are accompanied with a metal preservation tube containing life documents, death certificate and any coin created during their papacy that bears their image. “The reason is to make sure that if a pope is ever unburied, the documents will confirm his identity,” Keeney clarified.

The Terracotta Army, a form of funerary art, was buried with Qin Shi Huang, China’s first emperor, in the third century B.C. These terracotta sculptures, representing the emperor’s armies, were intended to protect him in the afterlife. Figures of the generals were the tallest. After local farmers discovered the large burial pits in 1974, experts estimated that more than 8,000 soldiers, 130 chariots and more than 670 horses lie near the emperor’s mausoleum.

More contemporary celebrities often have unusual requests granted. Among the items in actor Tony Curtis’ casket were a traveling bag filled with favorite photographs and letters, a model of his 25th anniversary Trans-Am, driving gloves, his Navy medals, his grandson’s baby shoes, gold coins, two favorite watches, a yarmulke from a Budapest synagogue he helped renovate, a DVD of clips from his favorite film, his iPhone, sunglasses, seven packets of Splenda (he apparently poured it on everything he consumed), one Percocet tablet, paintbrushes, paints, sketchpads and a pen.

Actor Humphrey Bogart starred in *To Have and Have Not* (1944) with Lauren Bacall, his fourth wife. Her most famous line from the movie was, “If you need anything, just whistle.” When Bogart died, Bacall placed a whistle inscribed with the line inside the silver urn with his ashes.

Actor and comedian George Burns was buried next to his wife, Gracie Allen, with three of his favorite cigars. Michael Jackson was buried with one sparkly white glove made famous in 1980s Thriller videos. Famed reggae musician Bob Marley chose his red Gibson guitar, a Bible open to Psalm 23 and a stalk of marijuana.



Passions and Pastimes

Odd wishes for the final journey often reflect cherished objects and activities of the deceased. In New York City, baseball caps – especially the Yankees – are frequent requests, according to Amy Cunningham, owner of Fitting Tribute Funeral Services in Brooklyn.

“Many years ago, we had an elderly man who was a fox hunter; he died peacefully in the care of hospice,” remembered Jeff Fraley, owner of Fraley Funeral Home in Moorefield, West Virginia. “His son was in the U.S. Navy at the time and requested that we bury his father’s first rifle and his mounted fox with him in the casket. I think about it every time I pull into that cemetery and see his grave.”

Doug Colvin, mentioned at the beginning of this article, developed a process to float and seal any object in a hard, clear, acrylic material. To showcase the substance, his company lined a casket entirely with crisp new bills, then sealed money onto its exterior; shiny silver dollars floated in the clear acrylic. They even took it to coin shows, and people got in and took pictures. Colvin formally donated his “money casket” to the Houston museum and was eventually buried in a less elaborate casket.

“It’s rare not to have something in the casket,” exclaimed Erin Roberts-Orr, third-generation funeral director and embalmer at Roberts Funeral Home in Wellsville, Ohio, a small town of about 3,500 people. “People see it as a way to personalize the funeral, and we encourage it.” They often place cards and letters over the person’s

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heart. Sporting goods are popular, too, particularly golf clubs. Bigger items are brought less often due to the limited room, noted Roberts-Orr. “For a bow hunter’s request, we unstrung the bow – we didn’t want anything to happen.

“We had a young man recently whose mom buried with him his Christmas presents she had already bought. One was a fishing pole.” In fact, recalled Roberts-Orr, “There were a lot of Christmas gifts. We tried to put them at the foot of the casket.”

For their own relatives, the Roberts family has made some interesting choices. “\$100 worth of scratch-off lottery tickets went with my grandmother when she was buried,” said Roberts-Orr. “My other grandmother was a funeral director and very proud of it. We put her license and plaque in with her.”

Sports gear is cherished elsewhere in Ohio, too. In Cincinnati, Scott Gilligan, NFDA general counsel, remembered that “a cousin who was a big golfer wanted golf balls buried with him. Going down the church steps, you could hear them rolling in the coffin –ba-bump. Everyone laughed,” he shared.

Cunningham is happy to include anything related to someone’s work. “I like the idea of sending people off with remnants of their meaningful existence. Books are very popular – a favorite book or one they may have written. I had someone buried with maps of Paris, a city they were fond of.”



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Food and Drink

Sometimes a favorite food or beverage inspires a special request. Frank Sinatra, known for his enthusiastic relationship with Jack Daniels, succeeded in having an empty bottle of his favorite beverage buried with him. The ancient Chinese, Vikings and some tribes also buried their dead with assorted food and drink to enjoy, Keeney noted.

When a 13-year-old boy died in a traffic accident, said Cunningham, “all the kids came to the funeral. His best friends, who walked to school with him every day, brought his favorite sandwich and put it in [the casket] with him. They were very sweet about it. We left it in prior to the casket close the morning of the burial.” In fact, she observed, “It’s okay to have moisture in the box in a natural burial. I want things to go into the ground. The desire is to accelerate the body’s return to the source.”

The main point, said Cunningham, is that “these are mementos. You want to send the person off. It’s almost like the Egyptian belief that worldly goods are useful in the afterlife.”

Timeless Treasures

In ancient Egypt, memorial jewelry was customary. Though protective amulets were considered equally significant protectors of the living and the dead, some were made specifically for the afterlife, symbolizing what will be needed there.

A recent major exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, “Jewelry: The Body Transformed,” featured funerary jewelry from the mummy of a wife of pharaoh Thutmose III, who ruled from 1479-1425 B.C. “The pieces in this impressive set speak to both the need of all dead to have the necessary protection to make the transition from this life into the next, as well as the high status of this individual, a member of royalty,” explained Diana Craig Patch, Lila Acheson Wallace Curator in Charge of the Department of Egyptian Art.

Some objects were laid over the abdominal incision that allowed embalmers to remove internal organs. The jewelry included a broad collar, heart amulet, vulture pectoral, folded cloth amulet and anklets or bracelets of amethyst and gold. Gold sandals and pieces of gold jewelry for protecting digits during burial reflected the woman’s high rank. A hip belt’s “large beads contain pellets that made a sound as the woman walked or danced... New research shows that other pieces of jewelry – broad collars and gazelle-decorated diadems, for example – associated with hip belts are depicted in scenes where high-ranking women carried out roles in what appears to be a ritual” related to the cult of a powerful female deity. “The hip drape would make enticing sounds that would attract the deity to the ritual,” said Patch.

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Legal Considerations

When a family makes an odd request, are there legal issues to be considered? Scott Gilligan, NFDA general counsel, said he doesn’t know of any. “They’re mostly cemetery regulations – about things like animal remains in a coffin – so check with them” if you’re uncertain, he advised.

“I want to help a family say goodbye but also abide by the laws of the state,” said Cunningham. Marijuana is one example of potential difficulty. “If someone puts a stick [of it] into the casket, do you remove it discreetly and not tell the family?” A Bible might stymie a funeral director, too, she suspected. “Is it okay to be buried with that?”

“Never put in anything alive,” Cunningham advised. “The whole idea of pet remains is changing now. I hear people talk about it, and some are saving pet remains.”

Cremation can raise separate issues. “Someone once asked if a gentleman could be cremated with his iPhone!” Cunningham reported. “Someone else brought a bottle of champagne for the casket – I was worried about the glass shattering or exploding in the retort.”

“We want to do what they ask, but we try to stay away from liquids and live flowers,” said Roberts-Orr about a family’s request. “With a casket and vault to seal, you’re trying to keep any moisture from the body, so we tell the family to use artificial flowers and empty any bottles.”

“Personally, to put an item with my loved one is significant not only to their afterlife,” Keeney confided. “It will bring me comfort knowing that they have an object they cherished or that helped them know who they were in life – that they’re not alone in the casket.”

Carol Milano is a Brooklyn, NY-based freelance writer who has written about funeral service for more than 20 years.

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