

Chapter Four
MUSEUM OF THE DEAD

"You must remember your dead sweetly,"

A parking lot vendor outside the museum, explaining why he sells mummy-shaped candies.

On the morning of June 9, 1865, the remains of Dr. Remigio Leroy were removed from crypt #214 at Santa Paula Panteon Municipal because no one could be found to pay his grave tax of 50 pesos. When the cemetery caretakers pried open the French physician's wooden casket, located in the middle of a concrete wall of tombs, the men were horrified, according to one of many local legends. One man immediately fled and another fell to his knees in prayer because both feared they had just unleashed the devil.

Dr. Leroy should have been a skeleton. He died three years earlier during a cholera epidemic. His beard appeared to continue to grow beyond his death, but his eyes had vanished. With his dropped lower jaw and his head slightly tilted to the right, Dr. Leroy still looked as if he's in the middle of an engaging conversation.

Was it the hand of God or Satan?

The brightest minds of 19th-century Guanajuato - priests and politicians and philosophers and scientists- gathered to examine him. Even an old Indian woman said to be able to communicate with the dead was brought in to take a look. She allegedly ruled Dr. Leroy wasn't sufficiently dead for her spiritual powers to work. Little was concluded beyond the fact that Dr. Leroy was actually dead and posed no health threat. He was a mummy, like the ones in Egypt, except that he was an accidental one.

The most decisive action came from the cemetery's underpaid caretakers. They started charging admission to the steady stream of curious who wanted to see the mummy.

So began a strange new industry - even for a country that joyously celebrates its dead every year. Dr. Leroy was the first of 112 mummies to be discovered. Each of them was pulled from the virtually airtight wall of tombs, free of bugs and dirt.

By 1894, 29 years after Dr. Leroy was unearthed, the first El Museo de las Momias opened. It was in the same location where the mummies were stored, in catacombs underneath the hilltop cemetery.

Oddly enough, while city officials kept strict records of which dead person owed taxes, other pertinent information, such as the name of the person removed, have somehow been lost.

The lack of real information helps explain why so many feel free to cast whatever belief and story they want on the mummies.

More than a half million people visit the mummies each year. The current museum, in the same location of the original catacombs, is sleek and beautiful..

The parking lot is full of hustlers trying to sell tourists trinkets and candies that look like the mummies. You can hire a guide for a tour inside the museum. One guide will tell you this mummy may have died of sadness and this one was stabbed and this was one a witch.

Another guide may tell you very different stories about the mummies. So, really, it's an exercise of creative story telling. Throughout the years, writers, philosophers, film makers, politicians and academics have gathered to examine the mummies. Now, thanks to the Detroit Science Center, some of the latest technology is being applied to the mummies to help obtain scientific answers. But whatever hard, clinical truths the scientists unearth, no one doubts the mummies will continue to be a litmus test of our own humanity.