

Exhibit trades in fear

Luc Sante's dark museum of crime and punishments

If you go

"The Museum of Crime and the Museum of God"
Through June 23
Apexart, 291 Church St.
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TRIBUNA. The writer Luc Sante recalled a childhood scene that provides a window into "The Museum of Crime and the Museum of God," an exhibit of photos, artwork and curiosities culled from his own collection linking these two "combustible substances" — and dark obsessions — crime and religion.

After his grandmother had died, she was simply laid out in the front parlor of the family home. "For the next three days, I said goodbye to her when I was going off to school," said Sante, who was born in Verviers, Belgium. "Then the funeral procession took off on foot from our house. There was no embalming. It was very much the Old World. The kind of squeamishness that people have about death today wasn't present then. Death was part of life."

A pop-culture critic and historian, Sante has become known as a street-wise excavator of forgotten worlds, particularly those in his adopted city of New York. His 1991 book, "Low Life," has been celebrated for its re-creation of Manhattan's underbelly, the Lower East Side, from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries. He followed it up with "Evidence," a book of NYPD crime scene photos dating from 1914 to 1918, accompanied by his own comments and excerpts from newspaper accounts. A couple of those photos — plus a handful of outtakes — are included in the current show, which is at the gallery Apexart through June 23.

When Verviers lost its textile factory, "an industry that had existed in some form since the Middle Ages," Sante's father moved the family to Summit, N.J. A difficult transition followed, in which they bounced between Belgium and the U.S., until his father finally secured a job. While most American boys were fascinated by horror and fantasy, Sante was drawn to the darkness of the everyday. His mother turned his



Luc Sante stands next to an old theatrical backdrop depicting the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. The exhibit includes 100 items from his own collection of religious artifacts and crime photos, juxtaposed with handwritten quotes from such differing sources as St. Augustine, Friedrich Nietzsche and pulp novelists.



These covers are from French dime novels bought in a flea market. Sante is currently working on a book about Paris, where he's following his usual method of collecting items in the hopes that they "might come in handy — and they usually do."

head away from the theaters on 42nd Street, and the mysteries of adult life

became attached to the forbidden notion of crime. "I wasn't interested in



Sante bought these 1946 police surveillance photos on eBay. Taken through venetian blinds, the shots observe a man standing on 52nd Street and Eighth Avenue in Brooklyn.

violence," Sante said. "Take a crime movie from 1952 and remove the actual crime. What's left are these very mundane, banal things. People wore hats, smoked cigarettes and tended to have rendezvous in bus stations."

Once Sante moved into the city as a young man, he began to collect old photos and articles connected to this other netherworld.

"In the early '80s there was this brief period where people sold stuff on the street, everywhere," he

recalled, pointing to a photo of a man lying in a coffin. "I was just struck by the image."

What's striking in his images of murders and car crashes and religious fervor is their commonplace quality. "This could happen to you too," Sante said. "I was brought up in this very Catholic notion that you could meet your maker at any moment."

Both crime and religion trade in fear, he noted. "Both face down death by converting it into a promise."