Sometime in the early 18th-century Juan de Ciscara, a Spanish engineer, drew a plan for the remodeling of the Cebu Cathedral. It was an ambitious project that because of its size and grandiosity was deemed too much for a small city that almost had no Spanish residents living in it.

The aborted plan was particularly interesting because it featured elements that have been discouraged after the Council of Trent. Unlike in Renaissance churches were a churchgoer is projected immediately into the body of the church with a view of the sanctuary, the 18th-century plan for the Cebu Cathedral had a “coro baxo” or a choir box right smack at the nave which prevented a direct view of the altar when entering the main door.
An example of a choir box in a nave in London’s Westminster Abbey.

Although it was not specified in the plan but the presence of the choir box could also lead us to guess that there might have also been a provision for a chancel screen just like in medieval churches and cathedrals.

Carved with latticework and images of saints, biblical figures and ecclesiastical symbols, a chancel screen, more commonly termed as a rood screen, covers the sanctuary and in effect lends an aura of mystery to the churchgoer as to what is happening while the Holy Mass is going on. Churches today that still have choir boxes and rood screens include the Anglican church of Westminster Abbey in London and the Roman Catholic cathedrals in Barcelona, Spain and Mexico City.

Rood screens were removed from Roman Catholic churches after the counter-reformation because such visual barriers between the clergy and the laity were inconsistent with the decrees of the Council of Trent. Changes in the way the Holy Mass is celebrated may have also influenced the manner in which churches were being designed and built in the 19th-century until now.

A choir box and a chancel screen at a Roman Catholic church somewhere in Spain.
The Ciscara plan for the Cebu Cathedral places the Altar Mayor or the main altar at the crossing. Another altar which was called Altar del Perdon or Altar of Forgiveness was to be located at the apse, just a little behind the main altar. Was this Altar of Forgiveness an influence of another altar of the same name in Mexico City’s cathedral?

After the death of Bishop Sebastian Foronda, the apostolic administrator who commissioned the Ciscara plan, the newly-appointed bishop described the cathedral building project as demasiado grande y enorme para una ciudad pequena so the plan was scrapped and a simpler one was adopted.

Interesting as it is and just like the cathedral of Manila, the Cebu Cathedral was also built and rebuilt many times over and Ciscara’s plan was just one of the many highlights of it. It should be noted that another plan was drawn in the 19th-century, this time in the form of a Greek cross with the main altar right at the crossing so that it could be seen from any point inside the church. Unfortunately just like Ciscara’s, it too was never realized.

An Afterthought on the La Muerte

Macabre images occasionally have one purpose and that is to remind man of his mortality and the fate that comes when the appointed time arrives. In Europe, images of skeletons in a variety of poses in places like tombs and even churches are not uncommon. In one instance, according to a Roman Catholic priest who studied in Rome, antique crosses for missionaries have skulls in it to constantly remind them that death will strike anytime aside from it being a symbol of Golgotha.

It is not surprising therefore for such macabre images to reach our country but what makes it interesting though is that it is quite uncommon here. Perhaps because after Spain another colonial power, this time a liberated one, took hold of our country and freed us from folksy ideas? Or maybe it is just plain taboo to speak of death in any manner?
A particular town in Cebu holds the distinction of having a peculiar image that many will find a bit disturbing. Even a non-practicing Catholic will scoff at the idea of a skeleton being paraded during Good Friday alongside with images of biblical figures like St. Peter and St. Mary Magdalene. For a country wanting to see religious images carved in full baroque splendor, a skeleton vividly dressed in a black robe and standing while holding a scythe and an hourglass is just too morbid a thought.

However as earlier mentioned such images only serve to remind us of something that is beyond our domain. Even the Passion images during Holy Week have a purpose of reminding us of Jesus’ suffering and death. Whatever differences we may all have there is one thing that is common to all of us and that is death. Each and everyone of us will soon meet our fate at the appointed time. There is no way to stop it and the only thing that we can contend is to prepare for it in whatever manner.

A Passion of Ivory Images

Somewhere in a quaint town in Cebu is a cast of ivory images that come out only twice every Holy Week. Whereas other places in the province would have a procession of life size images carved out of wood, this town could very well pride itself with having the largest collection of ivory images that depict the Passion of Jesus Christ.
The images are not big. They are only about three to four feet tall and most are of the *de bastidor* type. Four of the existing Passion images — San Pedro, Santa Veronica, Santa Maria Magdalena, Mater Dolorosa — have heads and hands made of solid ivory while the rest have an ivory face mask or are made entirely of hard wood. The image of San Juan would have been the fifth with a head and hands of solid ivory had it not been allegedly sold and replaced with a wooden image in poor ivory-finish in an attempt to fool the people that it was still the original.

According to lore, the images were procured by the parish priest in the late 18th-century and are as old as the stone church itself which was built around the same period. In order to have someone to look after them, the priest distributed the images, one for each prominent family in town to act as caretakers.

Handed down from one generation to another, the images have been remarkably well-kept except for the San Juan which was purportedly sold by those entrusted to care for it. The ivory rooster that accompanied the
image of San Pedro also turned “magically” into wood after being turned over to a “pseudo-art restorer” for restoration.

Interestingly, another family bears the responsibility of looking after a peculiar image that is totally out of place when put side-by-side with the biblical figures. This image aptly called as La Muerte, which means Death in Spanish, is also part of the Passion ensemble.

La Muerte is no other than a skeleton dressed in a black robe bearing an hour glass on the left hand and holding a scythe on the right pretty much like the Grim Reaper. The skull and the phalanges are made of solid ivory while the rest are of wood. This image however should not be confused with Mexico’s Santa Muerte or Holy Death and the cult of San La Muerte or Saint Death in other South American countries as these are venerated sacred figures that stemmed from the fusion of Mesoamerican and Catholic beliefs. The Catholic Church also frowns on such cults attributed to Death.
The La Muerte is nothing but a symbol of death and it precedes all the other images when processioned. A small pickup truck mealy decorated with flowers is used to bear it instead of the traditional carroza perhaps to give light to the fact that it is not a venerated figure but rather just a mere symbolism of man’s mortality.

Seeing the Passion images for the first time will stun anyone who has a particular interest for such religious icons. Most of them would come out only during Holy Tuesday while some would appear again on Good Friday. The La Muerte and some other images like the crucifixion scene and the Santo Intierro would come out only during Good Friday. For the rest of the year they are kept at closely-guarded storage areas and for some ivory images, at bank vaults.

Remarkably, two of the caretakers verbalized the value of caring for such treasures and seeing the need to
hand it down to those who are serious enough to look after it so that past incidents would not be repeated again. One caretaker lamented as to who to turn over the image entrusted to her now that she is already very old. None of her direct descendants, most of whom are already working abroad, are interested with looking after it.