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Barton Lidice Benes

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THE APARTMENT

Barton Benes' West Village studio apartment is a walk-in curio cabinet. There are African masks on the walls; there's a statue of the Virgin Mary built of dollar bills; there's a straw used by Monica Lewinsky. In the kitchen, alleged bone chips of Catholic saints hang over the balsamic vinegar.

"Here is a human toe that was found on the Williamsburg Bridge," Mr. Benes said to a visitor the other day. "My doctor thinks that it may have fallen off a homeless person with gangrene."

He pointed to a model airplane made out of tiny chunks of jet fuselage. "I found pieces of T.W.A. Flight 800 on the beach on Fire Island, right after it blew up."

Nearby was a ring made out of actor Larry Hagman's gallstones.

"That got me in *The National Enquirer*," Mr. Benes said.

The 59-year-old Mr. Benes has H.I.V. and emphysema. When he was particularly ill last spring, he formalized plans to bequeath his 850-square-foot home on Bethune Street to the North Dakota Museum of Art in Grand Forks, where it will be reconstructed. The apartment will be a permanent exhibit, and Mr. Benes' ashes will be placed inside.

"It makes me comfortable that I get to live in my own pyramid now," said Mr. Benes. "When I am gone, my collection won't be in a museum basement. My brother said that he will still be able to visit me in North Dakota."

In the meantime, the collection of Mr. Benes—who recently published a book called *Curiosa: Celebrity*

Relics, Historical Fossils, and Other Metamorphic Rubbish—is still growing. "People give me things all the time," he said as he pulled open a drawer. "Some woman once sent me fat from her liposuction. I also have a receipt for an expert-witness fee from a media mogul. You can't print his name; he'll sue me."

Another relic was labeled "A gram of Picasso." "I was high one night, and I scribbled on this Picasso lithograph I owned," Mr. Benes explained. "I woke up horrified the next morning. I threw the lithograph into the blender. He put the mulch in old cocaine vials. The vials sold out immediately. 'I threw regular paper in the blender and sold 'cut' grams of Picasso," he said.

Mr. Benes' art dealer, Jill Weinberg Adams of Soho's Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, said that the "street value" of one of the Picasso vials is several thousand dollars in Europe.

Mr. Benes said his interest in relics started when he stole the bone of a monk from catacombs in Rome in 1963. "Here is my latest stolen bone," he said, indicating a small souvenir from a Czech church. "It is from the skull of a man who died of the Black Plague in the 14th century."

Mr. Benes once obtained international notoriety for his controversial AIDS art. He made AIDS ribbons out of the ashes of his friend Brenda, who died of the disease. His traveling exhibit *Lethal Weapons* included a water pistol and a Molotov cocktail filled with his own blood. In 1994, Swedish health officials heated the exhibit's pieces to 160 degrees for safety rea-

sons. Two years later in England, a Tory councilor tried to shut down the show on moral grounds.

The North Dakota Museum of Art, however, showed *Lethal Weapons* in 1994 without controversy. "People in North Dakota have no preconceived notion of art," Mr. Benes said. "I think it has to do with the isolation. Whatever they see is art. Even school trips came."

The museum's director, Laurel Reuter, was pleased that Mr. Benes decided to bequeath his apartment. "We're pretty liberal in North Dakota," Ms. Reuter said over the telephone. She said an archivist from the museum will travel to New York and videotape Mr. Benes' studio to get exact measurements.

"With a small relic, I can make a big sensation," Mr. Benes said. "A small thing can be more meaningful, more moving. I have this new project—somebody gave me a crate lid belonging to Sam Waksal. The crate had contained a telescope. I am going to make it into Martha Stewart-like handicrafts."

—Dylan Foley