

## A REVIEW OF "TORTURE THROUGH THE AGES"\*

by

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The *Tropicana Hotel* in Atlantic City held a museum exhibit this summer titled "Torture through the Ages." The exhibit explored the often disagreeable, nearly unbelievable account of man's inhumanity to man, featuring actual devices of torture used on people such as ourselves centuries ago. While an effective educational exploration, the exhibit's unspoken message had an unsettling but compelling appeal: the off-centeredness of the human animal and its complex social failures.

Upon entry to the exhibit, one is treated to a vast room lined on its perimeter with both texts and devices. The viewer can take hours to wind through the exhibit, reading and viewing, but as I observed that summer day, most of the patrons' invested time was in the pursuit of comprehension. The patrons, with their mouths agape, emitted frightened empathetic gasps for air, and a sublime aesthetic fascination was revealed on their faces as they stood transfixed before each device pondering the inherent cruelty. As I looked at their faces, I imagined the questions and comments that must have been racing through their minds:

"Who thought of that?"

"That's got to be excruciating."

"How long did that torture last/with what frequency was it used?"

"Could you die/live from that torture?"

"What could they have done to deserve this punishment?"

"What was wrong with these people?"

The question of torture offends our modern sensibilities. Groups such as Amnesty International exist to protect people from such heinous acts. We, Westerners, look at torture as a frightening expression of sick mindedness, but see it as an artifact from a bygone and intellectually inferior age. We are incredulous to learn that torture still occurs worldwide. Some of the devices such as the neck-screw, a collar with a spike that is tightened into the victim's throat until asphyxiation, were used as capital punishment appallingly close to the modern day; the neck-screw had its reign in Spain ended in 1976.

And yet, that torture exists is a cruel and bizarre manifestation of the human condition. Torture is used as both a punitive and corrective measure, aiming primarily at the infliction of great pain. Severe pain marshaled, not in the pursuit of death, but as a means of "dangling" the victim near death without the relief that death would bestow. What is it that causes this abuse of humanity? Could it be a severe self-hatred, a fear of political impotence, or a need to control and subjugate a marginal population to the will of the powerful? Can an explanation of torture even be reduced to a single theme?

The use of torture devices in Europe may be traced back as far as 1180 AD when knights returned from the First Crusade. The knights had both seen and experienced every torture represented in this exhibit. Some of the devices are simple. The use of chains to place the human body in uncomfortable and excruciating positions that led often to a slow and painful death was a common punishment for political prisoners. The "stocks," a wooden yoke for the hands and/or the feet, was used primarily on whores or thieves. Placed in a social setting, such as the town square, the wrong-doer suffered from both the discomfort of the stock and humiliation at the hands of the public as the whole community could heap abuse upon the wrong-doer.

The exhibit also displayed devices of a more fierce and formidable nature. Thumb screws consist of a screw for each fingernail that twist into the soft flesh underneath until the nail is entirely raised. The "iron boot" involves pouring hot lead over a human foot placed in a cast. Two variations of the "rack" were displayed. The pulling rack held victims horizontally and pulled their arms and legs out of their sockets extremely slowly. The hanging rack suspended victims in the air by their arms, which were tied

behind their back and then pulled upwards. These punishments have a common design in that they refuse to offer death, though prolonged and repeated encounters with these tortures, as was often the case, usually led to death. Is this an unfortunate byproduct? What is the purpose of pushing a person to the brink of death and pulling back?

Suspected witches had another host of devices to endure, most of them aimed at eliciting a confession. Continental Europe applied more brute force in these examinations, peaking during the Spanish Inquisition. In England, suspected witches were tried under civil law, making excessive tortures inapplicable, and ending with a hanging as opposed to Continental Europe's more popular "burning at the stake."

For witches, and other victims of torture, conditions in the dungeons were also torturous. Most people, because they were poor and could not afford to pay for a more "expansive" cell of three by six feet, were forced into one-by-one-by-six foot cells. These upright coffins were dark, dank cells with raw sewage rising and falling around the prisoners' feet, inviting rats and their related diseases. Actions as inconsequential as scratching an itch were prohibited because the prisoners' arms were restrained in these cells.

Witches were routinely lashed or poked with forks. Some torturers used devices with retractable prongs, so that when the pricking occurred, a witch would not scream in pain, thus proving her to be a witch. Other implements on display at the exhibit included: (1) the dunking machine, where victims were held under water until moments away from drowning, at which time they were pulled out into the air long enough to catch a few gasps of air before being dunked again; (2) immersion into boiling oil; (3) the "hook," which was a device that hung the victim just inches from the ground; (4) the "wheel," on which a naked woman was tied with her face out and rolled to her death; and (5) the Iron Maiden, a coffin shaped device filled with spikes that would pierce, but not kill, victims when the lid was closed.

The lurid appeal of torture maintains its grip on the modern imagination. Wax museums and exhibits such as this one at *The Tropicana* continue to attract viewers. While many of these instruments of torture have been on display before, a few rarely seen pieces of human history were exhibited, making this show more comprehensive than others. The logical flow from each presentation supplied an accurate and compelling look into the odder, more vitriolic aspects of human nature. Evocative and thorough, *The Tropicana* exhibit of torture enjoyed overall success in meeting its goals to inform, entertain, and purvey a compelling enigma of the human condition.

#### ENDNOTE

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