

An Historical view of Morgues in Europe

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Morgue :

A building or room in a hospital or other facility where the dead are kept pending autopsy, burial, or cremation.

A building where unidentified dead are kept pending identification before burial.

In : Farlex Partner Medical Dictionary, Farlex 2012

**Morgue designation comes from *Morguer*
“regarder fixement et avec orgueil”
a pondering observation.**

Morgue was the place on the prison (Grand Châtelet – prison Paris) where new prisoners were initially kept. Here the jailers could minutely inspect them and record their description in order to identify them.

BALTHAZARD, V. - Les Morgues parisiennes et l'Institut médico-légal de université de Paris /n: Methods and problems of medical education. ninth Series. - New York, 1928. - p.367-379

Near of this room existed another one where storage and identification of unknown corpses was done, so the word Morgue begun to be use also to describe this place.

This bodies were mainly from violent deaths such as murder victims or people who committed suicide, many resulting from drown episodes in Siena river.

The cadavers could be observed by the public through a grill covered skylight. This skylight opened out into the ground floor of a small interior courtyard of the building.

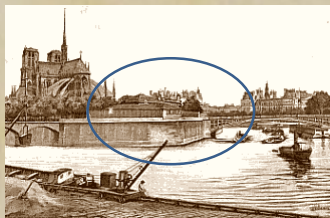


Le Grand Châtelet was destroyed 1804-1810

image from digital Library [Gallica](#),
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The first Morgue in the modern meaning of word, was built in Paris in 1804, near of the Saint-Michel bridge on Seine.

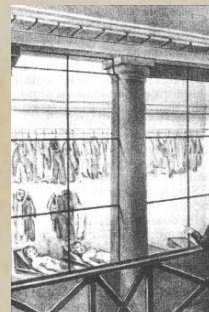
In 1864 Haussmann ordered the demolition of this morgue and the construction of a new one, behind the Nôtre Dame.



The dead bodies were displayed in a room exhibition only visible through a glass.

Twelve tables in black marble were inclined towards the public and the clothes were suspended above the bodies to facilitate their identification.

To retard decomposition, cold water dropped off over them, from time to time.



The conservation was a problem, on average the bodies were exposed for 72 hours.

The conservation of dead bodies will be solved by the installation of a cold room, and the adoption in 1881 of the “machine” presented to *The Universal Exhibition* of 1878.



Morgue room of fridges at the beginning 20th

The main objectify of the Morgue was to serve as a depository of the anonymous dead bodies. The intention of this exhibition was to help in the determination of their identities.

The evolution of the morgues is related to the growing interest on death matters and in the increasing responsibility for the dead.

Despite this pragmatic function, another less pragmatic one was developed. This place turned as an entertainment for curious locals and foreigners.

The Morgue became so popular as a tourist attraction in Paris that was listed in several British guidebooks.

ADOLPHE JOANNE

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1867

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MORGUE (DEAD-HOUSE). — THE CEMETERIES.

THE MORGUE.

The Morgue (at the western extremity of the Ile de la Cité, behind the apsis of Notre-Dame, at the entrance of the new bridge of Saint-Louis) receives corpses, not recognized, which have been taken from the river, or found within the jurisdiction of the prefecture of police, with which it is connected (2nd division, 4th office). It is open to the public from morning to night : but bodies are received there at any hour of the day or night. They remain exposed there three days, unless claimed sooner.

The Morgue received, in 1864, 376 bodies (58 women, 318 men).

Batignolles, chiefly used for the interment of the dead; — that of Montmartre, situated outside the fortifications, and serving for the interment of the dead from the 1st arrondissement; — that of the Villettes, consecrated to the interment of the dead from the 19th arrondissement; — that of the Père Lachaise, reserved for those of the 15th arrondissement; — that of the Père de la Chapelle, reserved for those of the 16th arrondissement. The four cemeteries of la Clapette, Belleville, Charonne and Montmartre have been closed and reserved for new graves. A new cemetery has been opened of late at the fortifications, near the Bastille, from Villejuif.

We will also mention



In 19th century it was a touristic place near the cathedral of Notre-Dame,
 "There are few people having visited Paris who do not know the Morgue"

Hughes Leroux - *L'enfer Parisien* (Paris, 1888)
 parisian social commentator

“Whenever I am at Paris, I am dragged by invisible force into the Morgue. I never want to go there, but am always pulled there”

Dickens, C.- The Uncommercial Traveller, London, 1866



In 1907, the morgue closed to the public, out of concern for morality reasons.

One journalist complained this situation :

*“ (...)It was the first free theater for the people.
And they tell us it's being canceled (...).”*

Veron, P. “Le Magazin Pittoresque”. March 1907, 171-172

After this date, only people who had a strong reason to believe they could identify a corpse, were admitted.

In Morgue there was a room for forensic autopsies.



Paul Brouardel (1837-1906)

Many medical examiners began their activity without ever attended an autopsy. With Brouardel this situation changed.

He requested for an autopsy larger room, better lit good illumination a small amphitheater for teaching.

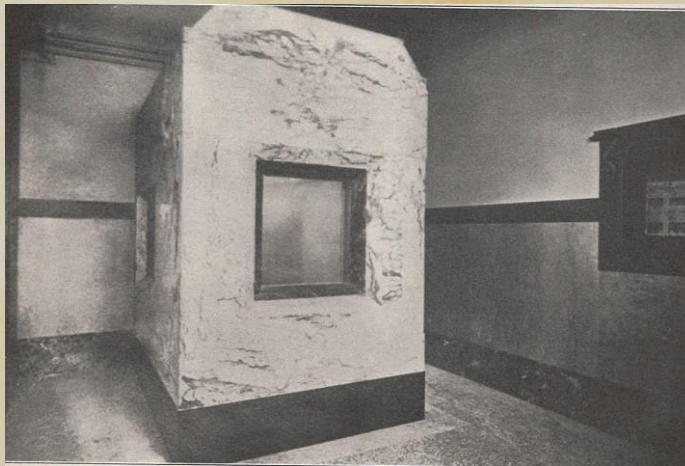
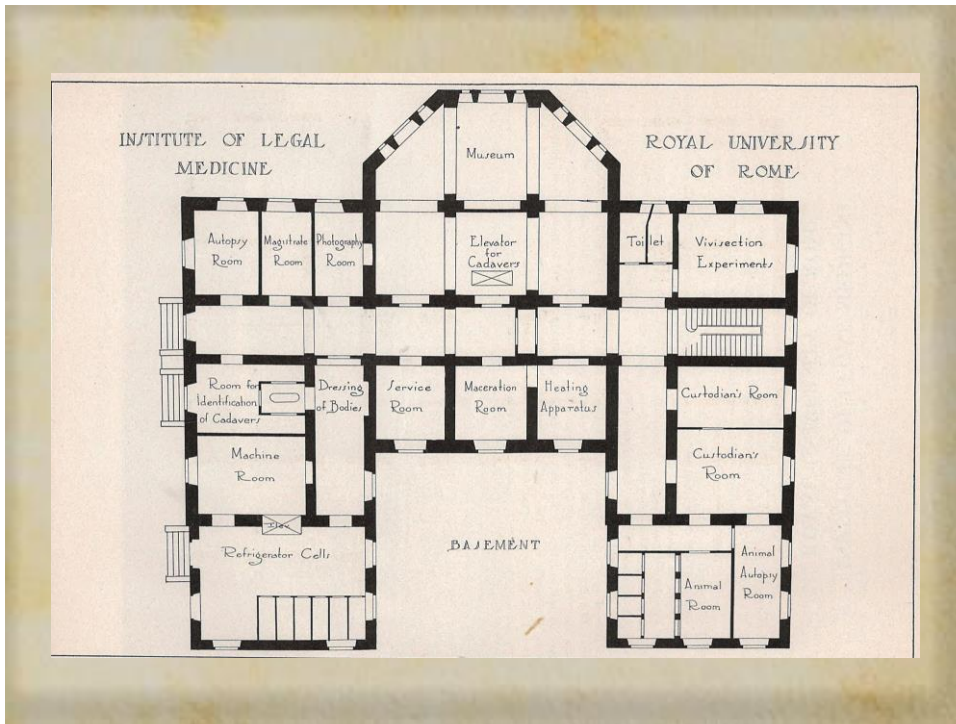
ROME

In the early 20th century it was created the Institute of Legal Medicine in Rome, which worked until 1923 near to the old "morgue" on the Tiberina island .

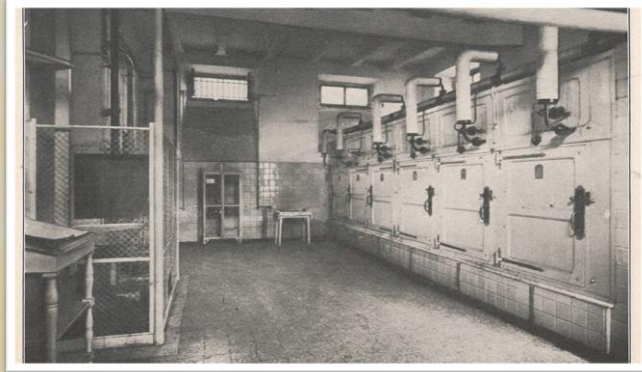
In the new building we could identify 3 functions : **teaching, research and judicial administration.**

The city government accorded to give modern means to the newly Institute, with the counterpart that unidentified cadavers and victims of violent death would be brought to the **morgue and would be at the disposal of judicial authority.**

In the basement of this building existed a large refrigerated depository for the corpses. Next to it was the room for the recognition with a large refrigerated cell in the shape of sarcophagus.



3 windows to visualize the body in front and both sides
In this room were displayed in a frame small cards (Photos, fingerprints and personal descriptions) of the dead bodies remaining unrecognized.



Refrigerador Cells

OTTOLENGHI S.- Institute of legal medicine Royal University of Rome
In: Methods and problems of medical education. ninth Series. - New York, 1928. - p. 89-96

BRUXELES

In the beginning of 20th century in the university hospital existed two mortuaries rooms:

- One for the hospital (dead bodies from disease);
- Another a *communal* - where they used to put to the bodies of :
 - a) persons who died in the hospital by injuries (accidents or crimes). These corpses stayed until instruction of the judiciary authority;
 - b) from people from small houses (many families lived in houses with just one room.

In the *communal morgue of Bruxelles* existed a room to identification and another room for forensic autopsies.

The unidentified bodies from public highway used to be displayed here but the situation changed and if someone was looking for a missing family member should go to judicial authorities in the Palace of Justice.

Neves, Azevedo - *Médecine légale et police criminelle*. Lisboa, Imprimerie Nationale, 1931

In Portugal the Morgues were created in 1899, one in Oporto, another in Coimbra and other in Lisbon. Since their creation they were linked to forensic medicine.

The morgues had to be close to medical schools, because these morgues were a space for forensic medical expertise, but also a place to teach the discipline of forensic medicine.



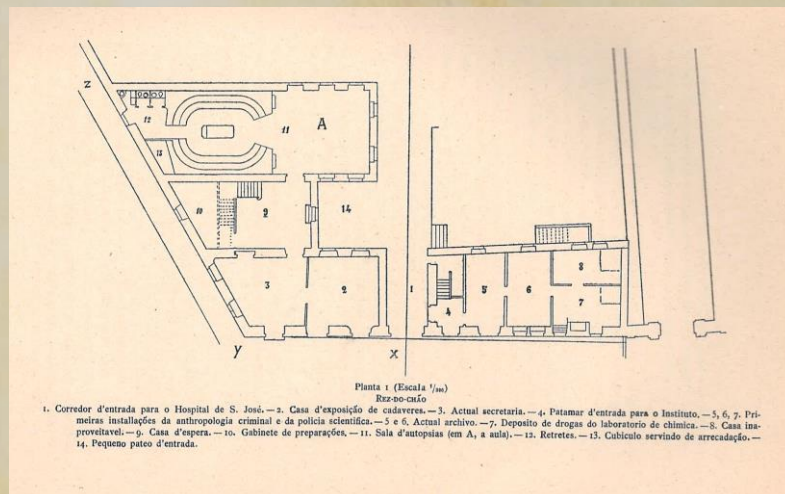
LISBON

In Morgue of Lisbon the work conditions were very poor and just have 5 workers

- 1 Director – that was the Doctor and the teacher of legal medicine.
- 1 secretary
- 2 assistants
- 1 janitor

At the beginning there were no fridges so they put ice on the bodies, and there were descriptions that the public use to raise the skirts of women corpse and the employers sold the hair of the dead.

This situation just star to change in 1911 with Prof. Azevedo Neves, when he when he became Morgue 's Diretor.



Lisbon Morgue in 1914, the Legal Medicine Institute was only created by law in 1918.



The new Institute began to be built in 1919 but just was completed in late 1930's