

"Up the close and doon the stair, But and ben' wi' Burke and Hare. Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief, Knox the boy that buys the beef."¹

Resurrection Men: Ethics in Mortuary Archaeology

Adrienne Tackitt



Anthropology and medical science share a haunting history of abuse in the pursuit of knowledge. Indigenous and marginalized communities have faced state-sanctioned violence driven by a desire for their physical remains; remains which are still treated as tools or curiosities today.

Was there consent?

History²

MODERN COLLECTIONS

SOME UNETHICALLY SOURCED REMAINS HAVE BEEN RETURNED/REINTERED, BUT MANY ARE STILL IN USE

MARGINALIZED MISTREATMENT

COLLECTED REMAINS ARE OBTAINED FROM MARGINALIZED, INSTITUTIONALIZED, AND MINORITY POPULATIONS

SANCTIONED DESECRATION

INDIGENOUS GRAVE ROBBERY AND MURDER BECAME A 'LEGAL' ALTERNATIVE

RESURRECTION MEN

DEMAND SURPASSING LEGAL SOURCES LED TO GRAVE ROBBERY AND MURDER

ANATOMICAL ACTS

LEGISLATION MADE UNCLAIMED CADAVERS AN ADDITIONAL, LEGAL SOURCE OF DISSECTABLE CORPSES

ANATOMICAL COLLECTIONS

CRIMINAL EXECUTIONS BECAME THE ONLY LEGAL SOURCE OF DISSECTABLE CORPSES

CURIO CABINETS

ANATOMICAL 'CURIOSITIES' WERE COLLECTED FROM QUESTIONABLE SOURCES AS A SHOW OF WEALTH

Anatomical Collections³

- Huntington Collection (D.C.):

4054 European immigrants from NYC who couldn't afford burial between 1892 and 1920.

All of these collections are still available for viewing or study.

- Hamman-Todd Collection (Ohio):

3713 low-status individuals who died in local hospitals between 1912 and 1938.

- Dart Collection (South Africa):

2605 unclaimed bodies compiled beginning in 1920.

- NMNH Fetal Collection (D.C.):

Abortions and stillbirths from D.C. and Baltimore in the early 1900s.

Is there respect?

Most victims were never given a voice, but even those who had one saw their wishes ignored. Charles Byrne, the 'Irish Giant,' was adamant that his remains be buried at sea rather than kept in an anatomical collection. His corpse was promptly stolen after his death, and his skeleton was on display at the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons for nearly 200 years.⁴

Excavated Cemeteries³

- Museu Bocage (Lisbon):

1692 corpses excavated between 1880 and 1975.

- Coimbra Cemetery (Lisbon):

570 corpses excavated between 1904 and 1938.

- Christ Church Spitalfields (U.K.):

968 corpses excavated between 1729 and 1859.

- St. Thomas Cemetery (Ontario):

579 corpses excavated between 1821 and 1874.

St. Thomas Cemetery is the only cemetery whose remains have been reinterred and are unavailable for viewing.

Rehumanization³

Remains have not been considered or referred to as human individuals, but rather as "specimens," "cadavers," "skeletal elements," or assigned numbers.

The communities which make up each anatomical collection were previously given acknowledgement by academics and museum curators, but even this tradition was quickly lost.

Carlina de la Cova, an anthropologist currently working at USC, finally spearheaded a push in 2008 towards the rehumanization of remains using social and biocultural methods.

Most ethically compiled anatomical collections:³

- Terry Collection
- University of Iowa/Stanford
- Bass Collection
- Cobb Collection

Is it necessary?

The first anatomical legislation to ever be passed legalized the dissection of executed criminals, linking anatomical collection to capital punishment. Modern laws have turned marginalized people into prey for collectors instead, converting this punishment into a form of structural violence.³

