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Waking the Dead, Speaking to the Living: The Display of Human Remains in Museums

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Waking the Dead, Speaking to the Living: The Display of Human Remains in Museums

Emily R. Stanton
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Abstract: Artifacts are immensely powerful aids in telling stories from the past, yet it is the dead persons of past eras who accrued a host of ethical and legal issues. This article discusses several perspectives on and problems with the practice of displaying human remains in museums and includes a number of case studies from select museums in the USA and Europe. As a precaution to the reader, this article also features a few images of human bodies on display in museums.

Keywords: Museums, mortuary archaeology, museum displays, public engagement

The Dead on Display

In the Pre-Columbian Mezzanine of the Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM), visitors are surrounded by a plethora of stunning ceramic vessels, including comical owls and snarling jaguars. However, as visitors reach the Peruvian section, they are greeted with a more jarring scene: two mummies. Mummified by the arid climate of Peru, these two individuals from the Chancay culture (c. 1000 - 1450 AD) are both wrapped in brightly colored textiles. The mouth of one mummy hangs open in a silent scream, the echo lost to time (see Figure 1). Typically, visitors react to this scene with a mixture of disgust and pity.

Across the Atlantic in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, visitors have decidedly different reactions to the dead on display. For example, several visitors reacted to the oak coffin burial of the “Skrydstrup Woman” (c. 1300 BC) as if they were reuniting with an old friend or relative. The pose of this Bronze Age young woman is quite relaxed; however, her slightly tilted skull, exposed teeth and eyeless sockets lend an aura of “spookiness” to her visage (see Figure 2).

This introductory study in contrasts is based on my own observations of visitors at the MPM and the National Museum of Denmark. In this article, I will explore some of the questions and controversies surrounding the display of human remains in several museums in Europe, the British Isles, and the United States, ending with a personal reflection on this topic. This article is intended to act as an introduction to the issues connected with the display of human remains in museums and provide a limited overview of the various debates and



Figures 1 & 2: Peruvian mummies at the “Preuvian Grave” case at the Milwaukee Public Museum, exhibit as of 2019 (L) and the “Skrydstrup” Woman display at the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen as of Summer 2018 (R). Photo Credits: Emily Stanton

perspectives on this subject. While artifacts are immensely powerful items in telling the stories of the past, it is the dead *persons* of past eras who have accrued a labyrinthine web of ethical and legal issues that museums must face.

Pieces of History or Pieces of People?

Passed in 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was a highly significant piece of legislation with profound implications for Native American individuals, federally recognized tribal

groups, archaeologists, and museum professionals. NAGPRA covers four categories of material culture: human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and cultural patrimony (United States Department of the Interior 2019). NAGPRA does not actually require the repatriation of objects or human remains. The law mandates that all American museums receiving federal funding, except for the Smithsonian, must complete inventories of Native American collections and seek consultations between Native individuals, archaeologists, and museums (the Smithsonian Institute follows a different set of repatriation provisions, the National Museum of the American Indian Act of 1989). Many American museums have argued that they must *both* legally and ethically comply with NAGPRA as part of their due diligence and preservation of the public trust in their institution. For example, a museum must legally provide representatives of the Cherokee nation with an inventory of all Cherokee-related objects in their institution. However, while this hypothetical museum does not *legally* have to repatriate any objects, they must also deal with the ethical ramifications of doing so or not. But what happens when Native American remains are displayed in other countries that do not have a NAGPRA equivalent? The Karl May Museum (KMM) near Dresden, Germany, illustrates the complexity of this issue.

Dedicated to the German Wild West adventure author Karl May, the KMM displays four human scalps, two of which are from Native Americans. According to Ojibwe repatriation specialist Cecil Pavlat, this display is highly culturally insensitive, especially since one of the scalps is thought to be from a member of the Ojibwe Nation (in Knight 2014). After several requests for repatriation of these objects, the KMM's then director, Claudia Kaulfuss, stated:

We're just showing a piece of history...We don't want to falsify the history of the Indians in America. Of course we'd enter into dialogue...[but] we're a museum in Germany, subject to German law...[and they] can't just expect us to hand something over without talking to anyone first, because then more people might come and soon our museum would be empty (Knight 2014, n.p).

It is worth remembering that the Karl May Wild West books act as a nostalgic touchstone for several generations of German readers. Although May himself never visited the Wild West, his *Winnetou* series generated many incorrect perceptions of Native American culture, religion, and identity through the highly romanticized character Winnetou, a fictional Mescalero Apache chief. Tellingly, many Karl May enthusiast groups “do not look to contemporary Native communities as models; rather they take their cues from *Winnetou*” (Adams 2019, 7).

As of 2016, the KMM refused to return these human remains, but did remove them from display (Knight 2016). The KMM's position is reminiscent of the mindset that Native Americans are somehow extinct; the scalps were displayed as if they were the relics of a past and no longer present people (see also Haircrow 2016; Leipold 2017; and Hunter 2019 for more discussions on this ongoing debate). In this perspective, archaeologists, anthropologists, and museums are the guardians of these "vanished" pasts. However, as American Indian Movement activist and author Vine Deloria, Jr., powerfully demonstrated in the 1970s, the Native pasts under study are the pasts of still living peoples (McGuire 1997, 63; Deloria 1992, 595-96).

Similarly, the material culture of the Sámi, the indigenous peoples of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia, was displayed in Scandinavian museums as the remains of static, obsolete entities. However, with the recent cultural revival movement among the Sámi, this ethnic group has pushed for "greater...self-determination concerning cultural heritage management and the debates on repatriation and reburial in the Nordic countries" (Ojala 2009, p.4). In other words, the ongoing debates about repatriation and reburial are not limited to only the United States.

Another critical but less well-known piece of legislation in this debate is the Vermillion Accord on Human Remains of 1989. Adopted by the World Archaeological Congress, the Vermillion Accord is an international agreement on the treatment of human remains. As an ethical code of conduct, the Vermillion Accord lacks the power of imposition of an actual law. A buzzword in this document is "respect." The first two principles of the Vermillion Accord state that:

1. Respect for the mortal remains of the dead shall be accorded to all, irrespective of origin, race, religion, nationality, custom, and tradition.
2. Respect for the wishes of the dead concerning disposition shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful, when they are known or can be reasonably inferred (Scarre 2013, 667).

Critically, as Scarre (2013, 668) notes, respect is a complicated term; someone can be respectful *to* a living person, but we cannot know whether the dead would be offended by our comments *about* them or not. For example, someone can say respectful things *about* George Washington or Beethoven, but we cannot *show* respect to them, as they are no longer living. Furthermore, as far as respecting the "wishes of the dead," these are often unknowns in archaeology.

In sum, modern repatriation laws (NAGPRA) and ethical codes of conduct (Vermillion Accord) have acted as catalysts, prompting museums in

the US, as well as in the UK and Europe, to reconsider the status of human remains in their institutions: are they pieces of history, or pieces of people? This debate has ensured that “the ancient dead have slowly but surely become everything but dead objects” (Nordström 2016, 207).

Afterlives – Identity Politics and the Dead

The display of the dead in museums is intimately connected to the current intertwined “hot topics” of identity politics and cultural recognition. As discussed above, the dead have in a sense become re-animated in the debates over repatriation and museum display. The political, social, and symbolic power of the dead should not be underestimated. In fact, some bodies have taken on new roles in death. At the MPM, the two Peruvian mummies and the bodies of Padi-Heru and Djed-Hor from Egypt have become “spokespersons” for their respective countries of origin. “After NAGPRA, we asked the governments of Peru and Egypt if they would like these mummies returned, and both parties said no. For them, these individuals act as cultural ambassadors, raising awareness and sparking interest in the histories of Peru and Egypt” (Scher Thomae, 2019). Perhaps “[t]hese examples should remind us that dead bodies have longer lives than is at first obvious” (Jenkins 2016, 251).

The Egyptian material at the MPM presents an additional layer of complexity where modern governmental wishes and ancient religious practices clash. Contrary to popular media misconceptions, the ancient Egyptians did not believe that the mummy of the deceased would rise, re-animated, to stagger out of the tomb (Scalf 2017, 173). Instead, one’s persona was composed of a number of elements: the body, the spirit (*ba*), the social identity, and the shadow (Assmann 2005 in Scalf 2017, 173). The *ba*-spirit connected the deceased to the solar deity Ra, while the corpse of the individual represented Osiris, lord of the Underworld. The *ba* allowed the deceased to move about freely and join Ra on his journey through the heavens each day. Each night, however, the *ba* would rejoin the corpse of the deceased in the tomb, just as Ra rejoined with Osiris in the Underworld. As Scalf notes, “[e]ach Egyptian individual hoped to participate in this cycle of [re]generation through their spirit and mummy” (2017, 173). In short, one’s mummy and tomb together acted as a sort of home for the spirit of the dead individual. However, once the mummy is removed from its tomb and placed in a museum display, this cycle becomes permanently interrupted. Here, however, the wishes of the modern Egyptian governmental authorities take precedence over the wishes of the ancient dead.

The aforementioned stance of the Egyptian government – using mummies in museums as cultural ambassadors – focuses on the precarious notion of the “useable past.” This idea of a “useable past” rests on the twin premises of

(1) the material record of the past is a commodity, and (2) this can be owned and thus controlled (Arnold 2019). A crucial question connected to this notion is *if* someone is manipulating the material remains of the past, *who* benefits and *why* or *how*? There are several ways in which the archaeological record can be manipulated, which in turn, affects interpretation. For example, nationalist archaeology may exaggerate or glorify the material culture of certain perceived ancestral groups while de-emphasizing the artifacts of others (Arnold 2019). Who *owns* the story does not always get to *tell* the story.

Too often, museum displays focus on using the past but not communicating its relevance to visitors. For example, “why should knowing about this part of the past matter to me today?” Case in point, Nina Nordström explores the stories told about Lindow Man himself in the 2008 – 2009 exhibit *Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery* at the Manchester Museum in England. Lindow Man, or “Pete Marsh” as he has been fondly nicknamed, died in the 1st century CE. His story is both intriguing and disturbing. Lindow Man had suffered blunt-force trauma to the head, was garroted and then his throat was slit before his body was deposited in a bog (James 1995, 96-97). Archaeologists dub this elaborate sacrificial phenomenon “the triple death.” Scholars once believed that Lindow Man had been deposited naked – barring the fox fur band around one arm – as a further gesture of humiliation. However, as textile scholars Gleba and Mannering point out, plant fibers rarely survive in acidic bogs, while animal fur rarely survives in bogs with basic pH levels (2012, 2); in other words, Lindow Man could well have been wearing a plant-based textile – such as linen – but it has not survived.

In developing this exhibit, the museum’s focus group discussed a number of perspectives about the iconic Lindow Man, ranging from that of forensic scientists to Pagan advocacy groups (Nordström 2016:258). Although such discourse certainly has a place in exhibitions of this kind, the great irony here was that while Lindow Man himself became a vehicle for contemporary concerns about diversity issues, his own story all but vanished – the very tale that would matter to most visitors. The then curator of the Manchester Museum, Bryan Sitch, used a fairly baffling analogy in discussing the exhibit’s aims: “...it’s important to discuss diversity. Pupils should show an understanding of different views. If they can understand Lindow Man maybe they can understand what it is to be a Muslim” (in Jenkins 2016, 256).

In short, contemporary concerns about identity politics, multiculturalism, and religious perspectives were unfairly projected onto an Iron Age bog body that had very little to do with any of these issues. *Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery* showcased contemporary societal and museum professional concerns while overshadowing “Pete Marsh” himself. Liv Nilsson Stutz provides a salient quote: “[w]hat ‘wakes the dead’ is always politically and historically

situated...The powerful agency of the dead is mobilized when the living care – but what the living care *about* may be highly variable” (2013, 805). Simply put, this case study demonstrates how we can make an exhibition about ourselves, rather than about the dead from past eras.

The highly evocative and controversial *Body Worlds* exhibit connects to other modern concerns, including globalization and its impact on cultural memory. Bodies fascinate the public. In *Body Worlds*, most of the bodies on display are human cadavers, preserved through a technique called “plastination” – these dead will not decay. Entitled *Körperwelten* in German, the exhibit features over 200 individuals in varying life-like poses, literally creating the “illusion of life after death...the bodies are reconstructed, fabricated, aestheticized, and minimally staged [in] an assembly of human flesh-sculptures” (Linke 2005, 15). The dead have become high art.

However, the designers of *Body Worlds* overlooked a critical point: by rendering the cadavers as art objects, and by offering no individual stories in labels, the exhibition erased any identity or memory of these people. As Linke provocatively states, “the installations attempt to create a ‘functional death’...[these] dead, robbed of their humanity, display their seemingly undead bodies with [an] objectivity that undoes and negates the museum’s task of memory production” (2005, 19). Additionally, there is a much darker undercurrent to one iteration of *Body Worlds* – where do the bodies actually come from? Contrary to the claims of the exhibition, most of the bodies are not from European donors to science, but are those of prisoners and executed criminals from “Eastern Europe, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and China...places where human rights and bioethical standards are not enforced” (Linke 2005, 20). The dead on display in *Body Worlds* have been appropriated by the museum, not to make a political statement, but as lifeless, yet immortal, objects. Like the unknown personal histories of these individuals, the discourse of “respect” for the dead was conveniently ignored in this particular museum context.

How controversial is the display of the dead? Does the public protest *en masse* when encountering human remains in museums? According to Dawn Scher Thomae, curator of Anthropological Collections at the MPM, “I get one, maybe two, concerned calls or emails per year about ‘our’ mummies. Keep in mind that we had over 37,000 visitors alone on our ‘Thank You Thursdays’ last year” (2019; see also MPM Annual Report 2018). Thus, while *some* MPM visitors are concerned, the vast majority have not complained about the “creepy dead people” as many visitors dub the mummies of Peru and Egypt. Is the situation any different in the UK? Jenkins notes that many visitors to UK museums *expect* to see the dead on display, and “there [is little] evidence that the general public [wants] a change in how ancient bodies were exhibited, nor

any suggestion that a significant part of the general public [are] more sensitive about display” (2016, 259).

If the public is generally ambivalent or unconcerned about the display of the dead, then from where does the controversy stem? Most people would answer “from minority groups,” but there is an overlooked faction in the debate of identity politics and the display of the dead: the museums community itself. Unfortunately, many museums worldwide are struggling to communicate their relevance, and negotiating with stakeholders over contentious issues usually leaves some voices unheard. Museum stakeholders generally include major donors, community leaders, civic and political figures, and representatives of the educational field. Understandably, each of these groups has its own agenda. Lynne Goldstein adds that “museums often try so hard to please stakeholders that they fail to appropriately interpret and provide context for the materials they display, and similarly, they are concerned with today’s context while ignoring the context of the past” (2016, 441). For example, to return to the exhibit *Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery*, ultimately the exhibit presented eight different perspectives on how Lindow Man mattered to various constituencies such as peat bog workers and forensic scientists. However, the focus group initially steering the exhibit was so concerned about exciting the general public that they sought to incorporate ethnic diversity and terrorism into this exhibit on a bog body from the 1st century CE.

Imagining and Interpreting the Dead

According to MPM interns, a pervasive rumor among visitors is that the mummies from Peru and Egypt are fakes. In fact, all four are authentic. However, particularly in the Peruvian case, so little information is displayed about the mummies that they might as well be fakes. No mention is made of their authenticity, grave goods, clothing, age, or gender. A student in the Museum Fundamentals class recorded a visitor saying that one mummy reminded them of Edvard Munch’s painting entitled “The Scream.” During my own Visitor Observation report for the “Crossroads of Civilization” exhibit at the MPM, I noticed that the mummies of Djed-Hor and Padi-Heru elicited responses of horrified fascination. Frequently, visitors said the mummies were “weird,” or “gross but awesome.” Many small children said they were scared of the “creepy dead people.”

People learn to view and interact with the dead in particular ways based on societal norms and attitudes; recall the two contrasting examples of audience reactions to the Peruvian mummies at the MPM versus the “Skrydstrup Woman” in Denmark discussed above. In the US, human remains are seen as problematic because of the legacy of colonialism and its lack of

respect for both native populations and their dead. In the 18th and 19th centuries, prevailing antiquarian attitudes held that the Native peoples of North America were “primitive brutes” or “noble savages.” A bizarre mixing of these attitudes led to a collecting craze, targeting Native American remains and displaying them as the relics of a vanished past. Centuries of disrespect towards the remains of their ancestors has understandably left many Native groups with mixed feelings towards archaeology and museums (Arnold 2019). However, AIM (American Indian Movement) activists and native authors like Vine Deloria, Jr., advocated and demonstrated that Native remains are not those of an extinct, vanished people. NAGPRA was the eventual compromise between Native groups, archaeologists, and museums.

A perhaps unintentional consequence of NAGPRA is that many large American museums avoid displaying any human remains altogether, with a handful of exceptions such as mummies and sarcophagi (Nilsson Stutz 2016, 270). By contrast, in Scandinavian museums, the dead, such as the “Skrydstrup Woman,” are seen as “distant relatives of the people that view them, or as interesting scientific specimens” (Stutz 2016, 272). In Europe generally, displaying human remains is not an “oddy” so much as tradition; famous examples include the Catacombs of Paris (see Figure 3) and the Sedlec Ossuary in the Czech Republic.



Figure 3: The Catacombs of Paris. Photo Credit: Emily Stanton

Cremations are another interesting omission in many museums. For example, at the MPM, “Crossroads” features two cinerary urns, one Etruscan and one Roman, but neither vessel contains the actual cremated remains of the individuals they commemorate (Figures 4 & 5). Generally, for antiquarian col-

lectors, the urns were far more valuable than the ashes of a long-dead, unknown person. However, these urns were often part of elaborate funerary assemblages. In Europe, for example, cremation burials could include items ranging from weapons, to feasting equipment, to jewelry.



Figures 4 & 5: Left: Roman and Etruscan cinerary urns, MPM as of 2019. Right: A reconstructed inhumation burial from the Palais de Rohan, Strasbourg, as of 2018. Photo Credits: Emily Stanton

Archaeologist Howard Williams eloquently discusses how “[i]t is the strikingly ‘human’ and ‘whole’ cadavers that have provoked the strongest emotional responses from the public as well as securing direct spiritual connections for particular religious minority groups” (2016, 293). Yet as Williams points out, this casts cremations and disarticulated human remains in an ambivalent light. Museums and academics have tended to regard cremations as “less evidential,” “less object,” and less worthy of research and interpretation, and this attitude in turn drastically effects how museums display this type of mortuary data (Williams 2016, 295). Furthermore, this perspective creates the popular and misinformed opinion that everyone in the past was afforded an inhumation burial. Of course, as any mortuary archaeologist will say, the burial practices of the past and present are immensely varied. The amount of variability subsumed under the heading “cremation” alone is impressive (see McKinley 2013). Thus, if cremation is a mortuary universal, why aren’t more museums and academic publications talking about it? This lacuna is critical as it impacts “how the archaeological dead ‘speak’ to the living” (Williams 2016, 325).

Another problematic avenue for conveying images of the dead in museums is the use of illustrations. A picture is worth a thousand words, as the cliché goes. In contrast to a block of text, such images have an incredibly powerful, even instantaneous impact. However, “the danger here is that such images are often the most accessible archaeological product consumed by a public

audience, with a currency that long outlasts the original discovery” (Giles 2016, 411). Thus, even though academic interpretations may change, the public will continue to envision the past as seen through the eyes of often uncritical illustrators. This is not to simply critique the skill or style of the artist, but rather to question their interpretation of the surviving archaeological evidence.

For example, Peter Connolly’s undeniably beautiful renderings of the ancient Celts of the British Isles are aesthetically pleasing and impressive images. However, they perpetuate a number of stereotypical notions about the Iron Age Celts: note the tartan-style clothing and spiky “limed” hair of the male individuals in figure 6 – “contemporary visual cues for ‘Celtic’ people – drawn from modern cultural stereotypes rather than explicit evidence from these burials” (Giles 2016, 410). Furthermore, pay attention to how it is only the men who are in active, dynamic poses; the two women and three children in the image are relegated to the sidelines or to hazily appearing in the background. Consequently, this implies that *only* adult men were involved in the burial rites of the Iron Age. How can archaeologists and museums circumvent this issue? Giles correctly advocates that archaeological illustrations should be an active collaboration between archaeologists and artists, and not something tacked on at the end of projects. Additionally, she suggests changing the typical style of images to something that will “prompt the viewer to think about the performative qualities of the burial, and how your view, experience and memory of these events might [differ], depending on your standing and relationships within this community” (Giles 2016, 426). Burials and the dead they contain are thus afforded “living” personalities.

Dead Relevant

In this article, I have explored a number of issues connected to the display of human remains in museums. The several case studies presented highlight both legal and ethical quandaries and how we represent the dead. While there is no one “solution” to any of these problems, I would like to propose an alternative perspective. Mortuary archaeology and its representation within museums is an inherently public topic. The dead draw the public in droves. Both archaeology and museums can offer profound experiences in exploring the past. However, many museum visitors do not critically reflect on the messages and lessons we can learn from the archaeological dead, largely because of the taboos surrounding death and the dead in modern society. Consequently, many museum visitors leave with the impression that the dead are no longer relevant, or that their “things” (grave goods) are all that matters. Our understanding of the past is focused on far more than just things, it is about people. Howard Williams and Melanie Giles have bestowed the creative moniker of “death-workers” on archaeologists – “mediators who construct narra-

tives about the dead – not simply individuals but entire communities and societies in the human past – for the living” (2016, 12). I would argue that this title can easily extend to museums. I believe that museums and archaeologists alike are shooting themselves in the foot by focusing on just the *negative* connotations of “morbid curiosity.” Instead, museums can and arguably should be places for generating “morbid curiosity” in the *positive* sense. What does this imply? A curious desire to respectfully explore the stories of ancient human remains and to “spy” on the ways of life, death, disposal and commemoration

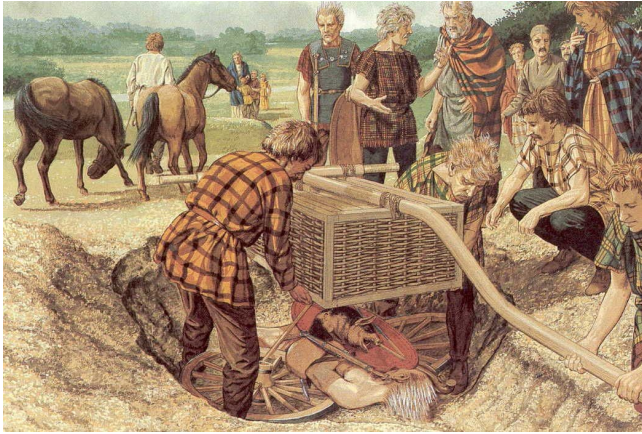


Figure 6: Artist Peter Connolly’s rendering of an Iron Age chariot burial in Britain. Source: <https://www.pinterest.de/pin/428264245800679462/>



Figure 7: Two views of a female chariot burial from the site of Wetwang Slack; visualizations by A. Watson. In Giles 2016, 424.

in the past and even in the present (see also Williams 2015 “Can Curiosity Kill the Corpse?”).

Why should we care about the long-dead? The dead vastly outnumber the living. Owing to social media, publications, and museum exhibitions, the “presence” of the dead has been diffused throughout society. Consequently, museums and archaeologists would do well to remember that “the dead exist behind and between archaeological things and heritage locations as much as they reside in them” (Giles and Williams 2016, 10). We must find ways to present accurate, respectful, and engaging exhibits about the dead and their grave goods. Waking the dead by telling their stories and celebrating their lives is how they continue to “speak” to the living.



Figure 8: Chocolate model of Tutankhamen’s death-mask in a Parisian chocolatier, 2018.
Photo Credit: Emily Stanton

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