



Anatomy at the Museum: Bodies Represented, Collected and Contested

Fredrik Svanberg (National Historical Museums, Stockholm)

Abstract

A major part of current repatriation claims, debates and conflicts over contested European collections concerns the heritage of human remains from old anatomical collections created in relation to anatomical museums now closed or significantly transformed. The history of anatomical collecting as well as the museum and research use of these collections in the 19th and 20th centuries is quite little known beyond a general historical frame. New research projects are on the way, however, revealing interesting new historical knowledge in this field which gives new perspectives on the "dark" history of the latest two centuries as well as new backgrounds to current debates on contested heritage and repatriation issues.

Introduction

Though there are very famous grand anatomical museums in Europe, such as the *Musée Fragonard* just outside Paris, the *La Specola* in Florence or the *Hunterian* in London, there have been no national museums specifically dedicated to anatomy. A central function of national museums, however, has had a very close relationship to anatomy and that is the presentation of human bodies intended to represent human collectives and national majorities and minorities in particular. Such representations were in the past often closely guided by anatomical specialists and by a body of knowledge of races and people types produced by the anatomical branch of medical science in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

National museums have staged countless exhibitions using crucial anatomical components: pictures, dioramas, statues and actual human remains to represent peoples. National museums have also collected human remains by the thousands in close cooperation with anatomists and all in all the relation between anatomy and museums, both national and others, is surely an important one to anyone interested in the general history of the museum as institution.

Though the relation between anatomy and the representation of nations and of national peoples in museums is very interesting and will be briefly sketched here, I would like, in this context, to focus my attention on the European landscape of specifically anatomical museums and their history since this is an important background both to understanding the influence of anatomy in national museums and to that of the important current debates over human remains in collections. I will do this by drawing chiefly on examples from Sweden that I am currently doing research on.

I will argue that in order to understand and handle current debates on human remains in museums, a more comprehensive understanding of the background of such remains in anatomical museums, or in anatomical collecting generally including how and why they were collected, exhibited and previously used in other ways, is badly needed. Most old collections of human remains have a background in anatomy or in contexts closely related to anatomy though they are currently often kept in museums other than anatomical, such as national historical or archaeological museums.

The anatomical background of human remains in museums is often forgotten or quite incompletely known. The once vast and impressive landscape of anatomical museums connected to European universities has for the greater part dissolved leaving behind little trace of its old form and is disconnected from scientific medicine. The heyday of anatomical collecting and display ended in the 1930s and during WWII, following the shocking understanding of the consequences of the production of knowledge of races and of the idea of anatomical people. This shift was sometimes followed by conscious attempts to erase disturbing memories from that phase of anatomical collecting by dismantling museums, hiding or even destroying collections, as will be illustrated from the Swedish example.

The current situation of anatomical museums collections is that a gradual rediscovery and new research interest is underway. The rediscovery process is for the most part critical of practices of the heyday period c. 1850–1950 and related to a steady flow of demands for repatriation and resti-

tution from minorities, first peoples and post-colonial nations. In some countries there have been significant debates and a new sensitivity has developed in cultural institutions, not the least in Britain (Jenkins 2011).

People types in the Brussels museum landscape

To gain an idea of the general influence of anatomy and in particular the idea of people types in the classical European national museum even a superficial view at some museums in Brussels may go a long way.

The first exhibition of the *Royal museum of the armed forces and of military history* was set up in the Jubilee palaces by Jubilee park in Brussels in 1910 for the world fair of that year. The first great hall of the museum seems to contain a more or less completely preserved exhibition from that time. A further great hall was opened in the 1920s to display uniforms and equipment from WWI and then successive halls and exhibitions have been added (www.klm-mra.be).

In the 1910 and 1920s halls a great number of full size contemporary representations of people can be seen, clearly representing ideas of people types of those times as derived from anatomy (fig. 1). The 19th century Belgians are all pinkish with healthy red on their chins and strong cheekbones. The representations of defeated Arabs and Congolese are brutish with blunt though equally stereotypical features. In the 1920s exhibition of WWI the characteristic national stereotypes were chiseled out to the brink of the absurd. The Germans have little bent-up moustaches, the French big noses and the British boast reddish complexions.

Anatomy and race plays an even greater role in the famous *Royal museum for Central Africa* in Tervuren just outside Brussels. The museum was set up by king Leopold II in close connection to his colonial project in the Congo and inaugurated in its present building in 1910 (www.africamuseum.be). A grand and famous representational program with life-size statues is to be found in the building complex.

The entrance rotunda contrasts images of civilizing Belgians as noble, elevated, even gilded, with gloomy, dark and weak Congolese at lower levels (fig. 2). Life-size sculptures in various exhibitions include the infamous “Leopard-man”, a terrifying representation of a Congolese legend, as well as other works intended to illustrate the projected superstition and lowliness of the Congolese (fig. 3; Morris 2003).

These are museum stories of us and them, told through the medium of anatomical sculptures. In the basement I found a temporary exhibition about the early 20th century sculptor Arsène Matton who was commissioned to journey to Leopoldville (present Kinshasa) in the Congo in 1911 to make plaster casts of living people to be used as anatomical examples of people types (fig. 4).

These two Brussels museums are good examples of the relations between anatomy and museums in the twentieth century. These relations were thus obviously by no means confined to the area of collecting but to the full range of representing people in museums (cf. Norindr 1996). Racialized sculptural programs and collections of plaster casts intended and indeed used to represent people types can be found in a great many museums as scattered and forgotten remains of anatomy in the museum.



Fig. 1: People types exhibited at the Royal museum of the armed forces and of military history in Brussels. Photo and copyright: Fredrik Svanberg.



Fig. 2-3: Belgians and Congolese as represented in the entrance rotunda of the Royal museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (left) and Congolese as life-size sculpture in the exhibitions (right). Photo and copyright: Fredrik Svanberg.

Anatomical museums

Modern anatomical museums grew out of seventeenth century anatomical theatres and were for the most part closely related to different medical departments at universities and anatomical institutes in particular.

The history of modern anatomical museums goes back at least to the earliest anatomical theatres in universities the first of which was set up in Padua in 1594. The anatomical theatres were also centers for collecting and places for anatomical exhibitions as can be seen in well-known seventeenth century engravings of such theatres.

The anatomical theatre of Leiden, for example, had quite an impressive anatomical exhibition with elaborately mounted skeletons of humans and animals set up to illustrate accompanying Latin aphorisms. This theatre was beautifully restored some years ago and is currently used in a modern museum context (www.museumboerhaave.nl).

In the eighteenth century, the enlightenment brought about a renewed interest in comparative collecting leading to the establishment of great new anatomical collections later turned into museums, such as the *Vrolijk* in Amsterdam and the *Hunterian* in London. The techniques of making wax models and of conserving and preparing corpses were also refined in the eighteenth century, as can still be seen in the famous eighteenth century specimens of La Specola in Florens or Musée Fragonard outside Paris.



Fig. 4: The remains of a 1911 project to make plaster casts of living Congolese people intended for use as the representation of people types. Photo and copyright: Fredrik Svanberg.

Anatomy, as a dawning science, was preoccupied with the exploration of and attempts to understand the human body as a biological phenomena. The popularity and importance of the techniques developed for preparing and exhibiting, however, anatomy also played a role in the making of cultural bodies.

As can be seen in the obvious examples of the famous so-called “anatomical Venus” of La Specola or the amazing exhibits of Musée Fragonard, the performative acts of making and exhibiting such elaborately *constructed* and staged bodies says as much about their makers as it does about human anatomy as such and they open up the way to a whole range of cultural interpretations.

In the nineteenth century, anatomical collections were gradually classified according to a more systematic medical science. Anatomical collecting now developed in accordance with a new modern evolutionary style as adopted by the museum (Alberti 2009, 2011; Åhrén 2009; Bennett 2004).

Older anatomical systems such as phrenology gave way to evolutionary classification and refined theories of race and human types based on mass scale comparative anatomical measuring. It was then that anatomical museums were filled up with thousands of measured human skulls in rows. Western nationalism and colonialism created needs for new bodily definitions of us and them in the form of people types which anatomy stood ready to deliver, allowing exhibitions of dioramas of specific peoples including their “typical” anatomical bodies to become very common.

The Uppsala case

In Sweden the modern struggle to define anatomical Swedishness started in the 1870s, culminating in mass measurements of conscripts in about 1900 which were compared to measurements of prehistoric archaeological skeletons leading up to a period in which race biology had a strong societal position well into the post WWII era (Svanberg 2012). Anatomical research had strong positions at institutes with well developed collecting and museum facilities in the universities of Uppsala, Lund and the Karolinska institutet medical university in Stockholm. These institutes as well as the Ethnographical museum in Stockholm had great collections. These are all in storage now, the two university collections having been transferred to historical museums.

Anatomy in Uppsala has a history going back to the seventeenth century and in a current research project concerning the modern period, starting in the 1840s when anatomy in Uppsala was thoroughly reformed along new principles, I am looking at the collecting and museum aspects of anatomy here more specifically. The anatomical institute revolved around teaching and research and a complex process concerning the constant inflow of human bodies for dissection, preparation and collecting. Uppsala had the greatest anatomical collection in Sweden, once comprising some 6 800 objects, mostly human remains, and including more than 2 000 skulls. This was a great pride until the war and there are unrealized plans in the 1930s for a major new exhibition building at the anatomical institute intended to house the collection.

In the morbid, grand race biological publication *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture* of 1921, commissioned by the Swedish society for race-hygiene, the anatomical museums and their makers were highlighted:

Edward Clason deserves at the same time to be remembered as the real creator of the Anthropological-anatomical Museum of the Anatomical Institution in Uppsala, the largest in Sweden. By means of untiring diligence and the most unsparing labour, he has here collected material of inestimable value. In the same way the principal part of the honour of founding the anthropological department in the Anatomical Museum in Lund belongs to C. M. Fürst. The museum of the Caroline Institute in Stockholm, which is especially valuable from the standpoint of comparative anthropology, is chiefly the work of Anders and Gustaf Retzius and Professor Albert Lindström. (Ramström 1921, p. 44f).

Post-war attitudes to this collection seem to mainly express the desire to forget about it. Most of it was stored in the 1960s and its previous contexts and use quite deliberately forgotten. Since the

1990s there is a growing interest in the old anatomical collections. This interest was fueled principally by repatriation claims made by different groups and in Sweden mainly the Sami. Repatriations have recently been made from the Uppsala collection to a Hawaiian group and to the Sami.

Though about 200 or so objects in the collection come from other countries or national minorities, most of them have a different, though presently unknown background. There were 3 000 or more human remains once present according to the preserved catalogues, but from where and under what circumstances did they enter the collection? The context, collection and display practices as well as the relations to the growth of anatomy as a science and to the developments of race research of the collection is also more or less completely unknown.

The collections currently form the basis for a museological research project, “The Headhunters, Museum Anatomicum and the Social Dynamics of Collecting” at the National Historical Museum in Sweden, that will study this collection with particular attention to how its objects may be seen as mediating social actors in a network of *relations* between museums, individuals, places and source communities, as well as how the range of *practices* relating to this collection have been and are socially productive.

Collecting the other

In 2010, Malin Masterton of Uppsala university defended her thesis in bioethics, *Duties to Past Persons: Moral Standing and Posthumous Interests of Old Human Remains*. Masterton makes a philosophical argument for the rights of dead persons, or rather for a restriction of the uses that the afterworld could rightfully make of human remains (Masterton 2010). Though a good argument, it seems slightly lacking of history set in relation to what actually went on in anatomy in Uppsala. Masterton is currently working at the Biomedical Centre of Uppsala, where parts of the old anatomy collection are still on public display to this day, making most specific use of past persons without obvious restraints (fig. 5).

Collecting was obviously a crucial component of early anatomy. Empirical knowledge of the world was to be established through the study and comparison of material objects (cf. Johannisson 1997, Åhrén 2009). To anatomy, those objects were human remains, or rather, as we shall see, living people transformed into objects by specific processes. Building a museum and the associated work with acquisition, display and the making of catalogues was of central importance at the institution in Uppsala. This can easily be seen in the priority of space at the comparatively small institution building: vast space was afforded the collection on display. Catalogues were kept and updated by the professor personally and in the university yearbook large spaces were accorded to the yearly description of collection growth.



Fig. 5: Skeletons of the Uppsala collection, as currently kept. Photo and copyright: Fredrik Svanberg.

The system of collecting of the anatomical institution had two major sources of acquisition: preparations attained through dissection and archaeology. Human remains coming from archaeological excavations (and from close cooperation between anatomy and archaeology) made up roughly one third of the collection.

At the institute, the main activities were teaching and research. Students had to pass an extensive program of dissections and there was a constant flow of dead bodies through the institute. Little is known of where these bodies originated in the early years but from sometime in the late nineteenth century, the Swedish anatomical institutions were legally allowed to use the bodies of people from poorhouses for dissection. This was little known outside a narrow circle within medicine, however, and inmates at the main body providing institution for Uppsala anatomy, the *Allmänna arbetsinrättningen* in Stockholm, most probably had no idea that they would

be sent to Uppsala to be cut up and possibly prepared for post mortem display if they could not provide their own burial costs after death.

Human remains entering the collection were de-identified. There are very few names registered in the catalogues besides the many names of anatomists that prepared the specimens. The typical loss of identity and previous life-history of objects entering collections is to be expected as it is a basic principle of collecting – the collected object is always made an example of the categories in the collection – but from an ethical point of view this seems more serious when human remains are concerned. The transformation of living people into specimens making up anatomical examples went through a process of death and its rituals, transportation to Uppsala, body storage, dissection and more or less complex preparation.

Anatomical collecting had many dimensions. The first was the development of modern anatomical knowledge and its applications for medicine and secondly the pedagogical value of the collection. The training of doctors through dissection is still an important part of medical training.

From a social point of view, however, the first thing to consider is that only some people were collected and indeed collectable. In principle, the anatomical collection is a collection of social others. In the evolutionary scheme of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, upper class westerners were on top and not only did they contrast themselves to indigenous populations inside and outside Europe but also to the lower classes. The bulk of the specimens on display in Uppsala came from poor Swedish people who died without the means to provide for their own burial. They were complemented by specimens from criminals, asylum inmates, self-murderers and by the skulls of indigenous people. There were many Sami, but also skulls from Greenland, Hawaii, Teneriffa, Ceylon, the South Pacific, Africa, Japan, South America and elsewhere. In particular executed criminals seem to have been more or less ritually taken apart and collected down to the smallest pieces as a sort of continued penalty (cf Gustafsson 1995). The main activity with the prehistoric and historical bones coming from archaeology was cranial measurement in order to make them speak of the evolution of physical Swedishness.

The professors, as well as thousands of students of medicine passing through the institution, could conveniently contrast themselves as white, upper-class, superior people to the others of the collection. The transforming tools of dissection, advanced preparation and museum display worked as powerful techniques for social differentiation and social confidence (cf. Åhrén 2009, pp. 33ff). The professors were in charge of the classification of people “types” so significant of nineteenth century physical anthropology and with profound social implications. Indeed, when the touring “People type exhibition” of 1919 was staged by the Swedish society for race-hygiene (leading up to the Race biological institute), the medical professors family trees were displayed as examples of highest quality Swedishness.

Collecting as socially productive

Museum collecting is not primarily about the handling and management of heritage objects and information systems. The whole thing needs to be seen the other way around. Collecting is first and foremost about the management of the world *outside* the collection that collecting achieves as

a practice. It is a meaning making machinery to manage the world. Collecting as a practice *does* manage objects and information in the interior of museums, but that is just one side of it and the most important management going on is the ordering of the external world. Collection systems manage collectors rather than the opposite and that is the real point of them.

Material objects play a crucial but little investigated role for the social, as have been discussed within the growing field of material culture studies during the last two decades (Miller 1987; 2005, Schiffer 1999, Latour 2005, Olsen 2010). What role do things play in enabling and securing social life (Olsen 2010:2)? Collecting should be seen as a specific way of trying to *regulate* ways of mixing and the configuration of social entities and social life. I wish to approach museum collection with perspectives concerning the social contexts and consequences of collecting and collections management (Pearce 1995, 2004; Bennett 1995, 2004; Knell 2004, 2008; Svanberg 2009). Focus will be placed on collecting and collectors rather than collections as such, processes rather than product and meaning rather than knowledge (Pearce 2004).

With the dismantling of its museums, anatomical collecting and its display was forgotten, though this was certainly an important part of late turn of the twentieth century history and of the making of modernity. Human remains that nobody knows from whom or from where they came filled the storage rooms of other museums. The anatomical collection is a source of information about these museums and the collection of persons as modern historical phenomena. Furthermore, due to their relations to specific places, communities and individuals, the collected objects are also the mediators of these relations between the museum, its former and current staff (and even the group or nation running the museum), and the people and places concerned.

This becomes especially obvious in repatriation cases (Gabriel & Dahl 2008), when the mediating role and agency of objects in the development of relationships may become highly significant. It may be claimed, however, that though repatriation cases will increase the symbolic charge of museum objects, *the potentials* for the new roles played by objects were actually there from the beginning due to their nature as situated museum objects with documented collection circumstances and links to places, communities and people. Thus it can be argued that, in one sense, any museum collection can be seen as, analyzed and also used as a set of potential social relations. Though this perspective may be particularly interesting to museums themselves, being public institutions geared to social interaction, this is not a common way to view collections.

The locations from which objects were collected, and the source communities there (Peers & Brown 2003), will in the current project be seen and analyzed as nodes in a network, linked to the museum administrating the collection and the group of people (Swedes, anatomists) administrating the museum. The links consist of the collected objects, thus acting as social mediators. The relations between the nodes, then, would first have been determined by the nature of the expeditions or other contexts in which the objects were acquired. These relations were maintained and mediated by the collected objects (actants) and possibly effected by the ways in which the objects were used in different ways up until now.

The images of “others” constructed by using the collected objects (in exhibitions and books for example) may thus be seen as part of the making of relations. In some instances the social

potential of the collected objects have recently been fully activated as source communities are now claiming parts of the collection, others predictably to follow.

Collection processes

Based on the described background it may be claimed that what can be called the collection process is an important key to the deeper understanding and background of many current cases of contestation and restitution claims regarding collected human remains.

Material objects out there, in the material world outside the museum, are most often tied to a whole range of different contexts in which they have relations to people, places and events. Their meaning and use may alter significantly several times. What the museum does in its meeting with this complex world of objects is first a very selective choice on what to collect, and then it places the selected object in a themed information system, most often with a very small number of key categories. The object gets locked in classification and made to exemplify and tell the story decided by the museum, most often not of itself.

The museum thus provides a new context and as we have seen concerning the anatomical collection, this context may change over the years.

Anatomical collecting may illustrate better than in most other instances the re-contextualisation and situating of objects that museums achieve. When collected in Uppsala, the names and life-histories of once living people were erased, making parts of them examples of either anatomical phenomena such as diseases or of racial and other body “types”.

In cases of restitution claims, what is visualized and at stake is really the specific themes and contextualisations made by museums. Museum history and use of objects will always be up for review in such cases. If the museum was truly a neutral place, there would be no need for restitution.

Researching collecting circumstances and collection history is often most revealing and may change initial restitution claims significantly. Recent investigations on some collections of the Ethnographic museum in Sweden, for example, revealed that ethnic attributions on collecting expeditions in the arctic made some 140 years ago were vague and more or less incompatible with current circumstances.

I think that current research on collecting and collections history is gradually transforming the repatriation debate, making it more complex, which may be seen in the recent UTIMUT collection of articles, for example (Gabriel & Dahl 2008).

Conclusions

Based on the previous discussions on anatomical collecting it may now be stressed that what is contested or “difficult” is not simply stuff being *kept* in museums, but *contextualized* stuff with *specific histories of museum use*. That which is contested is often contested *because* of these specific histories and investigations into museum and collections history may then significantly alter views on contested remains.

The understanding of *collection processes* is more generally a crucial key to the understanding of the formation of “heritage” and the specific contexts in which museums position their objects.

To better understand issues of contestation and restitution, as well as the roles of museums, collection histories and collection processes are therefore important to research further.

Anatomical collecting, the collection of human remains, is especially significant to the understanding of museum collecting more generally since it brings such collecting and the use of objects by museums to its point.

Bibliography

- Alberti, S. (2009). *Nature and Culture. Objects, Disciplines and the Manchester Museum*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Alberti, S. (2011). *Morbid Curiosities. Medical Museums in Nineteenth-century Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Åhrén, E. (2009). *Death, Modernity and the Body*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.
- Bennett, T. (1995). *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*. London & New York: Routledge
- Bennett, T. (2004). *Pasts Beyond Memory. Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*. London & New York: Routledge
- Ekelund, J. A. (1913). *Edward Clason 1829–1912. Hågkomster af J. A. E-d*. Uppsala
- Gabriel, M. & Dahl, J. (2008). *Utimit. Past Heritage – Future Partnerships. Discussions on Repatriation in the 21st Century*. Copenhagen: Greenland National Museum and Archives
- Gustafsson, T. (1995). *Fritiof Holmgren och straffanatomin. Tvärsnitt*.
- Jenkins, T. (2011). *Contesting Human Remains in Museum Collections*. London & New York: Routledge
- Johannisson, K. (1997). *Kroppens tunna skal*. Stockholm: Norstedts
- Knell, S. (ed.). (2004) (second edition). *Museums and the Future of Collecting*. Aldershot: Ashgate
- Knell, S. (ed.). (2008). *Museums in the material world*. London & New York: Routledge
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Masterton, M. (2010). *Duties to Past Persons: Moral Standing and Posthumous Interests of Old Human Remains*. Uppsala University. On-line at: <http://uu.divaportal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:310376>
- Miller, D. (1987). *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Miller, D. (ed.). (2005). *Materiality*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Morris, W. A. (2003). *Both Temple and Tomb. Difference, Desire and Death in the Sculptures of the Royal Museum of Central Africa*. Master degree dissertation, University of South Africa. Available on-line at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/1181/Dissertation.PDF?sequence=1>
- Norindr, P. (1996). *Phantasmatic Indochina. French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film and Literature*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Olsen, B. (2010). In Defense of Things. Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects. Lanham, New York, Toronto & Plymouth: AltaMira Press
- Pearce, S. (1995). On Collecting. An Investigation into Collection in the European Tradition. London & New York: Routledge
- Pearce, S. (2004). Collections and Collecting. In Knell, S. (ed.). 2004 (second edition). Museums and the Future of Collecting. Aldershot: Ashgate
- Peers, L. & Brown, A. K. (eds). (2003). Museums and Source Communities. A Routledge Reader. London: Routledge
- Ramström, M. (1921). Anthropological and Race-Biological Researches in Sweden. In Lundborg, H. & Runnström, J. (eds). The Swedish nation in word and picture, together with short summaries of the contributions made by Swedes within the fields of anthropology, race-biology, genetics and eugenics; a jubilee book given out, with the cooperation of experts commissioned by the Swedish society for race-hygiene. Stockholm
- Schiffer, M. (with A. Miller). (1999). The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behaviour and Communication. London: Routledge
- Svanberg, F. (2009). Museer och samlande. National Museum of Antiquities. Studies 12. Stockholm
- Svanberg, F. (2012). Arkeologin och rasforskningen ca 1860–1945. In Nicklasson, P. & Pettersson, B. (eds). Att återupptäcka det förflutna. Lund.