

Dossier Human remains and museums

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Scope

The focus of this dossier is on the history, current practice and future plans of human remains at museums and specifically at the Tropenmuseum. Recent research by the Tropenmuseum into their own collection resulted in an expert meeting and a publication on this subject. The publication: [Physical anthropology reconsidered - Human remains at the Tropenmuseum](#), and this dossier want to contribute to the international debate on this complicated issue.



In-depth: museum dilemmas

(Summary of the article "Why and when do human remains matter: museum dilemmas", pp. 16-20 in: [Human Remains & Museum Practice](#), ed. Jack Lohman and Katherine Goodnow, 2006)

Museums have a long history of collecting, storing, and displaying human remains. How they do so, however, is an issue now highlighted by two changes. One is the rise of challenges in the form of requests for return, questions about the legitimacy of retention, and objections to particular forms of display or archival treatment. The other is the recognition by museums that these challenges call for

understanding the meanings that make human remains significant, especially to the people being “represented” or “viewed”.

Isolating those meanings, however, is not the easiest of tasks. They are likely to be implicit, rather than explicit and easily accessed, surfacing only when some violation of expected actions occurs. They are likely to involve different views from those held by museum staff. They are also likely to vary from one group or one time to another. How then can we proceed? Proposed are several possible steps.



Step 1: Let’s question any assumptions about the universality of meanings

More specifically, let’s not assume that a) human remains always matter, b) that everyone wants them back, c) that their significance is the same for all people, even within a single cultural group, d) that all bodies are of equal significance (in fact some human remains matter more than others), or e) that meanings are static.

Step 2: Are copies or casts the same as “real” bodies?

When display of the original object is found to be objectionable or impossible, casts may be made and displayed in their place. Casts, however, may be just as objectionable to some as the bodies or remains themselves.

Step 3: Do some parts matter more than others?

In many situations, heads emerge as having particular significance, perhaps because they may be seen as expressions of power relations. Perhaps most upsetting are displays of what is considered private.

Step 4: Making comparisons with other remains

The comparisons that come most readily to mind are with remains that are part of death and burial. These may be grave goods, burial grounds, sacrificial altars or gravestones. The question is: How do human remains significantly differ from other remains that may also be symbols of power, disrespect or memory?

Step 5: What do people regard as the worst that could happen or the worst part of what has happened?

From a museum point of view one of the worst things that can happen is that a valued object becomes lost or destroyed. That could occur in the course of collection. It may also be seen as a worst outcome when objects once owned are returned. From the point of view of the people being represented or viewed, the worst outcome may be the denial of one’s status and dignity as a person or a group. The worst case or worst feature may clearly take several forms. The initial identification of the remains, however, may be a promising way to begin working toward the specification of meanings for particular places and people, and the shared understanding of meanings that we hope to see emerging between museums and their several audiences.

Documents

- [Physical anthropology: A brief sketch](#)
- [Physical anthropology and photography](#)
- [Human Remains: objects to study or ancestors to bury](#)

KIT's involvement

The Tropenmuseum today is the keeper of a historical collection of anthropological objects, an unbalanced collection of rare ethnological, archaeological and recent human remains.

Foremost and largest of the sub-categories is the core of the physical anthropological collection: that of human remains. Technically, this collection is largely devoted to so-called dry specimens (bones). Substantively, the objects comprise both contemporary and, though far fewer, archaeological remains. The objects were mainly collected after the establishment of the Colonial Institute in 1915. Human remains are divided into contemporary human remains and much older, archaeological items.

Based on the inventory (see pdf Inventory in the facts & figures section) KIT has divided the human remains into four categories:

- Physical anthropological remains in the strict sense of the term. Most of these items were donated by doctors, such as Dr Sitsen or Dr Vogelpoel, and medical institutions, such as the Military Medical Laboratory, Weltevreden, the Netherlands East Indies Medical School at Surabaya and the College of Midwifery in Amsterdam.
- Ethnographical remains, collected in the field by individual researchers, expeditions or confiscated by the colonial authorities, such as the Population Office at Hollandia.
- Archaeological remains, at least two hundred years old, donated or lent by those who excavated them, such as Dr H. Feriz and H. Geijskes.
- Recent historical remains from the Second World War, found in Dutch New Guinea.

Based on this categorization KIT discussed guidelines for each collection category at a meeting of experts, which took place on 23-24 February 2006. KIT asked the experts to examine the collection from a historical, ethical, legal and biomedical perspective. The deliberations of this meeting are summarized in the pdf Expert meeting.

KIT had formulated two main courses of action: preservation or de-accession. *Preservation* in this context means storing (or keeping) in the Tropenmuseum depot; providing information upon qualified request; no proactive provision of information; display according to SVCN ethical norms.

De-accession means (not necessarily in order of application):

- destruction by cremation or burial;
- destruction by donation for academic use (dissection, DNA research and practice material);
- donation to a Dutch or other museum anxious to acquire remains for proper scientific purposes;
- repatriation.

In short, the discussion of our categorization at the meeting of experts and the examination from a historical, ethical, legal and biomedical perspective showed that the guidelines we proposed for each collection category cannot be regarded as measures to be implemented. They are processes that have to be initiated. Today's human remains, recent historical remains, archaeological remains and remains that were collected together with cultural artefacts on expeditions, require different approaches and have a different momentum. Besides, it is important to develop our understanding of the value of the collection as a whole, including the photographs, documents and plaster casts, and their position in the history of physical anthropology and of Western colonial practice. The insights gained in the preparation of this *Bulletin* will guide our work in the future.

This *Bulletin* is just a first step. It is intended to announce we have these collections in our museum, and to start a debate about the questions that arise as a consequence. The contacts established in the

process of both data gathering and discussion about the next step, are valuable to us. They will be enormously helpful in the trajectory to come.

Publications

- [Bulletin 375 - Physical anthropology reconsidered](#)

Resources

Online

- **Dead bodies: The changing treatment of human remains in British museum collections and the challenge to the traditional model of the museum**
Tiffany Jenkins, 2008
Mortality, Volume 13, Issue 2, May 2008 , pages 105 – 118
[Go to article](#) (subscription for full text necessary)
- **Exchanging the inalienable. The politics and practice of repatriating human remains from Museum and Maori tribal perspectives**
Helle Jørgensen, 2005
Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. MA-thesis
[Go to article](#)
- **Human Remains: objects to study or ancestors to bury?**
Transcript from a discussion with a diverse panel of experts concerning the question of human remains in museums. Who are the owners?
Institute of ideas.
[Go to article](#)
- **Who owns human remains?**
Tiffany Jenkins, 2003 The return of human remains by museums and cultural institutions to the indigenous communities who claim them represents not just an assault on scientific research, but a faltering belief in human progress itself.
[Go to article](#)
- **Working Group on Human Remains Report**
The Department for Culture, Media and Sport published the report of the Working Group on Human Remains on Friday 14 November 2003.
The Report - to the Minister for the Arts - deals with the current legal status of human remains within the collections of publicly funded Museums and Galleries in England and Wales.
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- **Statement by McGregor Museum Kimberley.**
The archaeological department of the McGregor Museum in Kimberley, South Africa reacts to a claim that part of their human remains collection might be obtained by unethical means.
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Articles/Books in print only

- **... et in pulverem reverteris?**
Vom ethisch verantworteten Umgang mit menschlichen Überresten in Sammlungen sowie musealen und sakralen Räumen.

Dirk Preuß
Herbert Utz Verlag, 2007, 104 p,
ISBN-10: 3-8316-0739-7

[More information...](#)

- **'Who knows the Fate of his Bones'? Rethinking the body on display: object, art or human remains?**
Brooks, M.M. and Weston, C.
In: Knell, Simon, J., Macleod, Suzanne and Watson, Sheila (eds.) *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*. London, UK, Routledge, 2006, p. 343-354
[More information...](#)
- **Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: The tangled stories of things.**
Curtis, N.G.W.
Museum Management and Curatorship, 21 (2), 2006, pp. 117-127.
[More information...](#)
- **Federal repatriation legislation and the role of physical anthropology in repatriation.**
Ousley, S.D., Billeck, W.T., Hollinger, R.E.
American journal of physical anthropology., Suppl 41, 2005, pp. 2-32.
[More information...](#)
- **Narrative remains: Articulating Indian identities in the repatriation context**
Johnson, G.
Comparative Studies in Society and History, 47 (3), 2005, pp. 480-506.
[More information...](#)
- **The repatriation of human remains - Problem or opportunity?**
Smith, L.
Antiquity, 78 (300), 2004, pp. 404-413.
[More information...](#)
- **Human Remains Sold to the Highest Bidder!**
A Snapshot of the Buying and Selling of Human Skeletal Remains on eBay®, an Internet Auction Site.
Huxley, A.K., Finnegan, M.
Journal of Forensic Sciences, 49 (1), 2004, pp. 17-20.
[More information...](#)
- **Tradition, authority and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act**
Johnson, G.
Religion, 32 (4), 2002, pp. 355-381.
[More information...](#)

Journals

- **American Journal of Physical Anthropology**
The American Journal of Physical Anthropology (AJPA) is the official journal of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. The Journal is published monthly in three quarterly volumes. In addition, two supplements appear on an annual basis, the Yearbook of Physical Anthropology, which publishes major review articles, and the Annual Meeting Issue, containing the Scientific Program of the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists and abstracts of posters and podium presentations. The Yearbook of Physical Anthropology has its own editor, appointed by the Association, and is handled independently of the AJPA. As measured by impact factor, the AJPA is either first or among the top four journals listed in the anthropology category by the Social Science Citation Index. The reputation of the AJPA as the leading publication

in physical anthropology is built on its 83-year record of publishing high quality scientific articles in a wide range of topics.

[Go to journal](#)

- **Journal of Forensic Sciences**

The Journal is devoted to the publication of original investigations, observations, scholarly inquiries, and reviews in the various branches of the forensic sciences. These include Pathology and Biology, Toxicology, Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, General, Odontology, Physical Anthropology, Jurisprudence, Criminalistics, Questioned Documents, and Engineering Sciences. The Journal also includes similar submissions dealing with forensic-oriented aspects of the social science.

The Journal of Forensic Sciences is the official publication of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS).

[Go to journal](#)

- **Journal of human evolution**

Editors: William H. Kimbel, Susan Antón

The Journal of Human Evolution concentrates on publishing the highest quality papers covering all aspects of human evolution. The central focus is aimed jointly at palaeoanthropological work, covering human and primate fossils, and at comparative studies of living species, including both morphological and molecular evidence. These include descriptions of new discoveries, interpretative analyses of new and previously described material, and assessments of the phylogeny and palaeobiology of primate species.

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Websites

- [Human Remains at the Pitt Rivers Museum](#)
- [Exhibiting Human Remains. Australian Museum online](#)
- [The Meanings and Values of Repatriation: a three day conference, 2005](#)
- [Human Remains at the British Museum](#)
- [Bibliography](#)

KIT Library Queries

- [Physical anthropology](#)
- [Human remains](#)



Human remains in the KIT collection

- [List of donors of physical anthropological collections](#)
- [Inventory of collections, photographs and documents](#)
- [Search in the KIT collection](#)