

Respect for the Dead: Displaying Human Remains in a Museum

The Mütter Museum is notorious for bizarre exhibits. This medical museum contains the expected medical equipment and wax models but is best known for its stockpile of real human remains. It contains such specimens as the adipocere-covered body of Soap Lady and the bones of Carol Orzel and Harry Eastlack, sufferers of fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva. While many have enjoyed seeing these specimens and their associated social media posts, including members of the disability community who recognize themselves in some of the posts, the museum removed most of its YouTube videos in June 2023. They soon revealed that an internal review of their treatment of human remains was underway, and that they were creating an ethical policy on how to proceed with the specimens in future.

The museum wants to become more conservative in their use of human remains and respect the humanity of their corpses. Some of the bodies in the museum were acquired through grave robbing, nonconsensual dissection, and other unethical practices. Although there are laws governing the return of Native American bodies to their tribes, there are no laws requiring the return of other bodies, such as those of poor people, prostitutes, suicide victims, enslaved people, and other whose bodies were taken without consent in previous centuries. As a result, the museum's Board of Trustees is trying to determine how to proceed, along with a group containing museum staff and disability community advocates. Some argue that respect for the dead requires that bodies or body parts acquired without consent not be displayed, and they claim that many people who had physical disabilities would not have wanted to be stared at in a museum for hundreds of years after their deaths.

Others argue that many of these remains are educationally valuable, such as the scarred bones of syphilis victims. In a world where syphilis can be treated with penicillin, it's hard for many to learn how devastating the disease can be. Robert Pendarvis, an acromegaly sufferer who donated his enlarged heart, wants it back online to raise awareness of his condition. Many visitors to the museum learn about their own rare conditions there. Moreover, many of the museum's bodies have nowhere to go, as no information exists about their families or homes. "What's better: for them to be entirely forgotten and to suffer a second death," says Hanna Polasky, former Mütter communications and programs assistant, "or for them to be loved and cared about and taught with in a respectful way?"

Discussion Questions

1. What remains should the Mütter remove from display, if any?
2. What should our standard of respect for the dead be?
3. How best can education about disabilities and rare medical conditions be educational and not exploitative?