# Exhibiting Human Remains in the Museum:

# A Discussion of Ethics and Museum Practice

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The presence of human remains in museums raises an array of uncomfortable and contentious issues in the museum community. Many museums maintain large collections of human remains that contribute to scientific research, and the existence of these remains in museum collections can in itself be a contentious issue. However, the exhibition and display of human remains in the museum presents new challenges that directly confront the ethics and morality of museum professionals and visitors alike. Legislation such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and exhibitions such as *Body Worlds* have forced some museums to reconsider their policies on display, but existing guidelines on the display of human remains vary widely, often making vague recommendations for museum practice. By examining the display of human remains at the National Museum of Health and Medicine and the National Museum of Natural History, it is possible to better understand the challenges facing museums. The display of human remains in any museum is a complex issue that demands a complex answer. Allowances need to be made for the missions within museums that display human remains, as medical and science museums present exhibitions in a different context than natural history and historical museums. However, there are certain guidelines that can be universally applied. Legal guidelines and museum policies need to clearly define curatorial practices regarding human remains in the museum, clarifying the need for thorough interpretation, ethical context and provenance, and for sensitive displays of human remains appropriate to the mission of the museum.

## Existing Legal and Ethical Guidelines in the United States and the United Kingdom

Recent practices concerning human remains in North America have been dominated by the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990. While the act itself does not address the display of human remains, it affects the functions of

every museum that receives federal funding by providing explicit guidelines for the assessment and treatment of these remains by museums, as well as for the repatriation of human remains and other sacred objects to culturally affiliated tribes.[1] NAGPRA drastically changed the way museums dealt with Native American remains. While not explicitly required to do so, most museums removed indigenous human remains from all displays following the passage of NAGPRA, and now possess either "formal or informal" policies prohibiting any such future display of these remains. They acted out of respect for multiple statements made by Native Americans directly implying that "such public display, no matter what positive educational results it might involve, is offensive and hurtful to Indian people."[2] The changes that museums made to comply with NAGPRA were unprecedented, and perhaps long overdue, as an overwhelming percentage of human remains recovered from archaeological sites and held in museum collections are Native American.[3] Addressing the presence of Native American human remains in museum collections was an important step, but this strict legislation regarding culturally sensitive indigenous remains and items only makes it more apparent that no such legislation or guidelines exist for other human remains in museum collections.

In fact, there are no national laws that regulate the exhibition of human remains in museums.[4] With no legal restrictions or rules in place, museum ethics should play an integral role in decisions about display. The American Association of Museums (AAM) includes brief mention of human remains in its Code of Ethics, stating that "the unique and special nature of human remains and funerary and sacred objects is recognized on the basis of all decisions

[1] Francis McManamon, "Policy and Practice in the Treatment of Archaeological Human Remains in North American Museum and Public Agency Collections," in *Human Remains and Museum Practice,* ed. Jack Lohman and Katherine Goodnow (London: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006), 50.
[2] Ibid, 56.
[3] Ibid, 49.
[4] Ibid, 55.

concerning such collections."[5] This vague statement provides little information to guide a museum professional. The International Council of Museums (ICOM), however, specifically addresses the display of human remains, stating that human remains should be "displayed in a manner consistent with professional standards and, where known, taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated. They must be presented with great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all people."[6] Thus, ICOM specifically addresses issues of provenance as well as tactful display of human remains. ICOM'S code is decidedly more explicit than AAM's, giving guidance about acquisition and research, as well as display of human remains in the museum in three separate sections of the code. Although ICOM's Code of Ethics goes into more detail, it still relies on vague notions of respect and dignity that are difficult to qualify. However, these codes are only meant to provide overarching principles that can guide all museum professionals, and the ICOM code certainly succeeds in establishing a loose framework in which to develop guidelines.

An assessment of recent legislation and guidelines in the United Kingdom adds new layers to the ethical guidelines created by ICOM. The legislation and other policies established in the United Kingdom are groundbreaking and influential; thus, an examination of these new recommendations and policies is integral to a thorough discussion regarding the display of human remains. The Human Tissue Act, passed in 2004, focused on regulation of human remains less than 100 years old, with the majority of the legislation minimally impacting museum collections in the United Kingdom. Section 47 of the act, however, gave nine museums

[5] American Association of Museums, *Code of Ethics for Museums,* 2000. http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics/coe.cfm.
[6] International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, 2006,* 2006, 9. http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Codes/code2006_eng.pdf.

the ability to de-accession human remains less than 1000 years old, thereby giving them the power to repatriate portions of their collections.[7] In order to further address issues raised by the Human Tissue Act, as well as establish a concrete set of guidelines for storage, research, and display of human remains in the museum, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport created the publication *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums.* The guidance attempts to outline "best practices" for museums when dealing with human remains, and is meant to apply to all museums in the United Kingdom.[8] While addressing matters such as research, access, and repatriation of human remains, the guidelines specifically detail policies regarding display. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport makes an important qualification of which all museums should be cognizant, stating: "human remains should be displayed only if the museum believes that it makes a material contribution to a particular interpretation, and that contributions could not be made equally effectively in another way."[9] This is an extremely important condition for museums to consider before placing human remains on display. Most museums support choices for displaying bodies by stating that these exhibitions are didactic in nature; however, the guidance's recommendation notes that not only should these exhibits be educational, but that the display of bodies should only be considered if it is essential to the presented interpretation. There is an array of concerns that need to be considered when exhibiting human remains, but this is perhaps the most important principle that should guide any museum's decisions.

## Implications of and Reactions to Policies

Legal regulations, by nature, have more impact than ethical guidelines, but both forms of policies have influenced the display of human remains in the museum. As noted before, the

[7] Department of Culture, Media, and Sport. *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums,* 2005, electronic document, 12. http://icom.museum/who-we-are/the-vision/code-of-ethics.html.
[8] Ibid, 7.
[9] Ibid, 20.

implementation of NAGPRA caused most museums to remove Native American remains from display.[10] Public agencies such as the National Park Service established strict policies regarding the display of indigenous remains, stating simply that "Native American human remains and photographs of such remains will not be exhibited."[11] American museums are mainly concerned with NAGPRA legislation and its effect on museum collections. Museums with large Native American collections such as the National Museum of Natural History as well as the National Museum of the American Indian have even created departments in the museum that solely deal with repatriation issues.[12] As such, most American museums' policies revolve around the contentious issues that arose from this controversial legislation.

In the United Kingdom, some prominent museums have created their own policies regarding human remains and have made these guidelines public, often posting them on the museum website. In his article "Parading the Dead, Policing the Living," Jack Lohman asserted that the public display of such policies is an admirable and much needed step that has become increasingly common in museums, and that posting these policies "…is an important acknowledgement both of what the dead contribute to our living museums…and of their autonomy."[13] It is interesting to note, however, which defining elements and overarching principles museums have chosen to guide their policies. For instance, two prominent British museums have established quite different policies. The Museum of London's policy for the care of human remains is comprehensive, and maintains a conciliatory and sensitive tone throughout

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[10] McManamon, 56.
[11] Ibid, 55.
[12] Karin Wiltschke-Schrotta, *Human Remains on Display—Curatorial and Cultural Concerns,* Final Report, Fellowships in Museum Practice, 2000. Electronic document, http://museumstudies.si.edu/Fellowships/FMPFinalReportSchrotta.htm.
[13] Jack Lohman, "Parading the Dead, Policing the Living," in *Human Remains and Museum Practice,* ed. Jack Lohman and Katherine Goodnow, (London: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006), 22.

the document. The Museum states that it is "retaining, researching and curating human remains in a way that maximises their research and educational use, causes no offence, and treats the human remains in its care with the utmost respect."[14] In the section addressing display, the Museum notes that "careful thought should be put into the reasons for, and circumstances of, the display of human skeletons."[15] In contrast, the British's Museum policy concerning human remains takes an overall defensive tone. Most of the statements in the policy, however, revolve around retaining human remains in the collection, as the British Museum was one of the nine museums the Human Tissue Act allowed to de-accession human remains.[16] Regarding the display of human remains, the British Museum states that "in the display of human remains at the Museum explanatory and contextual information will be provided."[17] Following this statement, the British Museum also notes that the "public value of display will be balanced against feelings" of individuals with direct links to the remains or of communities that can demonstrate "cultural continuity."[18] The overall tone of the document, however, is firm and unyielding, defending the Museum's right to retain and display collections as it sees fit.

A common thread that runs through ethical guidelines as well as the individual policies that many museums have established is the emphasis on visitors' responses to the presence of human remains in exhibitions. For instance, *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums* asserts that "visitor surveys show that the vast majority of museum visitors are comfortable with and often expect to see human remains, usually skeletons, as parts of museum

[14] Museum of London. *Policy for the Care of Human Remains in Museum of London Collections.* June 2006. http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/CHB/Policies/MuseumPolicyonHumanRemains.htm
[15] Ibid.
[16] British Museum. *The British Museum Policy on Human Remains,* 2006, electronic document. http://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/Human%20Remains%206%20Oct%202006.pdf.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

displays."[19] Reflections of this statement appear in various contexts, including the Museum of London's as well as the British Museum's policies on human remains. It is a common assertion of museum rights, and often serves as a primary defense against critics questioning the ethics of display. Exhibitions that include human remains are often extremely popular, but this popularity in and of itself does not justify or wholly support the public display of bodies. This issue can be further investigated with an analysis of the exhibition of human remains at the National Museum of Health and Medicine, as this museum employed visitor surveys to gauge and assess their exhibits of human remains.

## A Medical Museum: National Museum of Health and Medicine (NMHM)

The National Museum of Health and Medicine was created in 1862, in the midst of the Civil War. The Museum (originally known as the Army Medical Museum) collected specimens from soldiers to organize a research collection, with no intention of placing these items on display. However, in the years following the Civil War, the Museum has continued to collect medical specimens and has created exhibits from its collections.[20] When visitors enter the current museum, they are confronted with an array of human remains from the Civil War to present day, displayed in a manner that illustrates the progression of medical history and highlights a variety of maladies and medical abnormalities. The Civil War area is perhaps the most prominent gallery, holding amputated limbs as well as various other skeletal remains of soldiers who for the most part, died on the battlefield or soon thereafter. One prominent exception is the case of General Daniel Sickles. It is a notable story not only for its peculiarity, but for its inclusion in many arguments exploring issues of consent and human remains. At the Battle of Gettysburg, Sickles was wounded by a cannonball that all but destroyed his leg.

[19] Department of Culture, Media, and Sport, 20.
[20] National Museum of Health and Medicine, *When Your Insides Are Out: Museum Visitor Perceptions of Displays of Human Anatomy*, http://nmhm.washingtondc.museum/collections/anatomical/articles/insidesout.html.

Surgeons amputated the limb, and Sickles survived the operation. After returning to Washington D.C., Sickles donated his severed leg to the Army Medical Museum, and reputedly often visited it at the museum.[21] The case of General Sickles is an interesting exception, but it should be viewed as just that. Human remains in museums are rarely donated by the person, and museums do not always possess a unique personal story to accompany and contextualize the remains on display. This is especially the case for the remains on display outside of the Civil War gallery in the National Museum of Health and Medicine.

Parts of the museum lack the historical background that the Civil War section utilizes to contextualize the human remains. For instance, in other sections of the museum, visitors view everything from human hairballs to fetal specimens with abnormalities displayed in glass bottles. The effect is both intriguing and disturbing, as the displays often seem to walk the thin line between freak show and medical display. But proponents of these displays at the Museum maintain that the initial disgust that many viewers feel is essential to the viewing experience, causing visitors to react strongly and then look closer at what is really at hand. In their article "From Privates to Presidents," Barbian and Sledzik advocate that viewers should "think beyond the disgust and aversion to the inner meaning of the both the beauty and complexity of the human body and the person who left it for us to examine."[22] But when viewing remains with strange and visually disturbing medical abnormalities, it seems difficult to make the leap from disgust to intellectual curiosity. To formally assess the range of visitors' reactions to human

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[21] Lenore Barbian and Paul Sledzik, *From Privates to Presidents: Past and Present Memoirs from the Anatomical Collections of the National Museum of Health and Medicine,* 2001, electronic document, 4. http://nmhm.washingtondc.museum/collections/anatomical/articles/HRWebversion.pdf.
[22] Ibid, 9.

remains on display at the Museum, NMHM contracted an evaluation company to conduct a visitor survey designed to evaluate visitor response.[23]

Overall, the evaluation of visitor responses concluded that the authenticity of the remains was an essential component to the visitor experience. NMHM found that visitors were comfortable viewing a wide range of specimen types, from skeletal remains to human organs.[24] Additionally, the survey showed that visitors easily transcended the initial feelings of disgust to fully appreciate the integrity and meaning of the remains. NMHM has used these findings to support and defend the display of human remains in the museum, maintaining that the unique experience of viewing authentic human remains is an essential museum experience.[25] Barbian and Sledzik support this assertion, writing: "Museums, as the stewards of history, have a commitment to maintain biological materials. Denying the visitor access to these materials denies them knowledge of themselves."[26] By citing the experience of the visitor as the most important factor to consider, this statement supports the rights of not only medical museums such as NMHM but also other museums to display human remains.

While the visitor experience plays an important role, the interpretation that accompanies the display of human remains is still of the utmost importance. In a medical museum, however, it is unnecessary, and perhaps even unethical, to provide biographical and humanizing information for the remains, especially for more recent specimens. This appears to be one of the greatest challenges for NMHM. As evidenced by visitor surveys, it is especially important in a medical museum to display real human remains, making this authenticity essential to the intent of the museum and therefore well within ethical guidelines. NMHM acknowledges the unique

[23] National Museum of Health and Medicine.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Barbian and Sledzik, 9.

quality of its collections, noting that "human materials can have such a visceral power that their mere presence in a gallery can transcend any specific learning messages we may want to foster."[27] It seems easier to learn from the remains that have the most historical context, such as those in the Civil War section of the museum, and more difficult to transcend the abnormalities and disfigurement present in the rest of the museum. In a 2002 *New York Times* article, a representative from the Museum stated that NMHM would "never abandon some of the more shocking displays," especially as "many visitors come specifically for the graphic reality."[28] A medical museum is more justified in its display of these shocking elements, but NMHM could bolster the integrity of these displays by providing more thorough interpretation of these shocking, sideshow-like elements. The exhibitions at NMHM prove that the type of museum is essential to the interpretation and display of human remains. The challenges faced by other museums can be explored through an exhibition of human remains at the National Museum of Natural History.

### ***Written in Bone* at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History**

The *Written in Bone* exhibition at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum utilizes artifacts and human bones to create a comprehensive picture of life in 17th-century Chesapeake. Drawing from the collections of Jamestown and St. Mary's City, as well as other Chesapeake colonial sites, the exhibition strives to teach visitors about the past through forensic anthropology, archaeology and historical research.[29] Visitors first learn the basics of forensic science, discovering how scientists determine sex, age, as well as various other distinguishing characteristics of human remains. Throughout the exhibition, visitors are prompted to use these

[27] National Museum of Health and Medicine.
[28] Alicia Ault, "Medical Museum of the Macabre Edges into Mainstream," *New York Times,* August 6, 2002.
[29] Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, "Press Release: *Written in Bone: Forensic Files of the 17th-century Chesapeake"* Opens Feb. 7 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History," Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, December 16, 2008, 1.

skills to uncover the mystery of the skeletons, and to use the discoveries of archaeologists and historians to supplement and enrich the narrative. These creative and interactive interpretative strategies ensure that the skeletal remains in the Museum are integral to the visitor experience and essential to the message of the exhibition.

The intent of the exhibition, therefore, is not only to teach visitors about the intricacies of forensic science and archaeology, but also to help visitors understand the skeletons as deceased human beings. The exhibition features "five stunning facial reconstructions based on actual skulls and two true-to-life-size figures clothed in appropriate historical garments."[30] In the book *Bodies in the Bog*, Karin Sanders speaks to the importance of facial reconstructions in exhibitions with human remains. Sanders discusses the dichotomy of viewing bodies in the museum, noting the difference between what anthropologists Elisabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey have termed the "object body" and the "embodied person." The "object body" is the physical artifact viewed in the museum, while the "embodied person" is the "imagined person who inhabited the body."[31] Sanders surmises that "curatorial strategies such as facial reconstruction can be said to suture 'object body' and 'embodied person' into one. In museum displays this resuturing, and the rehumanizing that comes with it, is of vital importance."[32] Ultimately, this is the most effective tool that the curators of the *Written in Bone* exhibition utilize, as it serves the dual purpose of enhancing the visitor experience and humanizing the skeletal remains on display.

Perhaps the most well-known reconstruction in the museum depicts Captain Bartholomew Gosnold, whose skeletal remains are placed near the beginning of the exhibition. It is startling to encounter such a realistic likeness of one of the most notable colonists at

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Karin Sanders, *Bodies in the Bog* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 192-193.

[32] Ibid, 193.

Jamestown. But perhaps the most striking examples of reconstructions in the museum are the unfamiliar and previously ignored inhabitants of the 17th-century Chesapeake. The exhibition thus serves as an equalizer of status, and gives these figures a degree of attention that cannot be attained solely through artifacts or historical documents. The use of reconstructions as an interpretative strategy establishes an essential visual link between the visitor and the human remains that lie before them. Attempting to help visitors understand the humanity of the skeletons on display nourishes the level of respect that visitors should possess when viewing human remains.

An interesting contradiction that highlights current imbalances in the interpretation and display of human remains is apparent in the first gallery, in which basic forensic methods are covered. Three skulls are displayed in a case designed to illustrate differences between skulls of sub-Saharan, European, and Native American descent, highlighting distinguishing characteristics that differentiate them. Close inspection of these cases reveals that while the African and European skulls are authentic, the caption beside the Native American skull prominently notes that the skull is a reproduction. As noted before, this is common practice in museums following the implementation of NAGPRA, but the absence of Native American remains in the exhibition merely accentuates the presence of authentic skeletal remains in the rest of the exhibition.[33] Certainly, the colonists would have never expected to be displayed in a museum, therefore, is it ethical to display them? The educational value of these remains is unarguable. But the disparity between the Museum's treatment of Native American remains and other human remains illustrates the difficulty of navigating uneven standards for the display and interpretation of human remains.

[33] McManamon, 56.

Contradictions aside, the human remains in *Written in Bone* are treated ethically and with respect, and their inclusion is essential to the interpretation and message of the exhibition. It is important to note as well that the press and articles surrounding the collections at the National Museum of Health and Medicine are more prominent than those stemming from the opening of *Written in Bone*, suggesting that little to no controversy has been generated by the Smithsonian's exhibition. Nevertheless, both exhibitions face challenges that any museum displaying human remains must confront. The act of placing human remains on display is in itself controversial. This issue is compounded by issues of provenance, accompanying text and interpretation, as well as method of display.

**Issues in Interpretation and Display**

For the most part, the National Museum of Health and Medicine as well as the *Written in Bone* exhibition, display remains with clear provenance. The majority of human remains on display in the *Written in Bone* exhibition come from archaeological sites in the Chesapeake.[34] At the National Museum of Health and Medicine, most of the human remains in the collection come from known individuals, a direct result of the Museum's original mission to collect known case studies.[35] This presents its own challenges, as museum staff often must work with the relatives of the individuals.[36] However, establishing the provenance of individuals is an important factor to consider before placing human remains on display.

Perhaps one of the most notable current examples of this issue is Gunther van Hagen's controversial exhibition *Body Worlds*, which raises a number of ethical concerns, not the least of

[34] Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, 1.
[35] Barbian and Sledzik, 2.
[36] Ibid.

which is the uncertain provenance of some of the displayed bodies.[37] In her essay "Anatomy Without Integrity," Ruth Levy Guyer maintains that museums must know the provenance of displayed remains, and must consider a number of problems if provenance cannot be established.[38] In reference to *Body Worlds*, Guyer questions: "if bodies are those of unwilling or improperly 'consented' donors, should they immediately be taken off display and properly buried? Or should information about their plights at least be offered to museum visitors?"[39] Guyer makes an important point that should be considered by any museum that displays human remains. Most museums do not display controversial exhibitions such as *Body Worlds* that raise questions about donation and issues of consent; however, all museums displaying human remains need to consider how to present the necessary information to the visitor, even if the information includes uncertainty about provenance.

To communicate pertinent and essential details, the interpretation accompanying human remains is of the utmost importance. As mentioned previously, the interpretation present in *Written in Bone* accentuated the underlying humanity of the remains on display, forcing visitors to encounter bodies as human beings rather than museum objects. Alternately, NMHM simply provides relevant medical information, and when appropriate, the accompanying case histories. Although NMHM approaches the interpretation of the human remains more superficially, this method is more appropriate for a medical museum attempting to highlight the medical condition rather than the individual's history. Both museums present an interpretation that is appropriate to the museum and respectful in intent. Respect, however, is a difficult concept to define, and can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

[37] Ruth Levy Guyer, "Anatomy Without Integrity," in *The Anatomy of Body Worlds,* edited by T. Christine Jesperson et. al. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 202.
[38] Guyer, 207.
[39] Ibid.

To accommodate the display of human remains in museums, and to accord these remains with the respect they demand, it is also important to carefully craft the design of the exhibitions. Many museums, cognizant of the current debates surrounding the display of human remains, have made significant adjustments to displays. For instance, in the United Kingdom, the British Museum recently loaned the Lindow Man, a famous bog body normally on permanent display in the British Museum, to the smaller Manchester Museum.[40] This loan raised questions about interpretation and display, as the Manchester Museum appropriately took the responsibility of displaying the Lindow Man quite seriously, establishing new guidelines for their museum and applying these guidelines to the other human remains currently on display.[41] The Lindow Man was displayed in a case that was much more dimly lit than the British Museum's exhibit, forcing visitors to peer into the darkness to view the body. After acquiring the Lindow Man, the Manchester Museum made provisions for a more sensitive display of all the bodies in the museum, including the mummies at the entrance. Each mummy was covered with white sheets, which prompted questions from some visitors expecting to see bodies openly displayed in a museum.[42] The Manchester Museum's displays went further than the necessary precautions for preservation, attempting to remind visitors of the sanctity and uniqueness of the displays.[43] Although it can be argued that they disrupted the content of the exhibition by concealing the human remains, the Museum's carefully thought-out exhibition afforded the human remains on display the consideration that they deserve.

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[40] N. James, "Repatriation, display and interpretation," *Antiquity* 82, no. 317 (September 2008): 770.
[41] James, 774.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

Before viewing the Lindow Man in the Manchester Museum, visitors read an inscription that advises: "To see these bodies is an exceptional privilege."[44] However the display is implemented, this should be a defining element of any museum exhibition that holds human remains. Both the National Museum of Health and Medicine and the *Written in Bone* exhibition could do this better. Although there are clear signs that note that human bodies and remains are on display, there are no notices that request respect, which is something that should be clearly displayed. However, by contextualizing the remains and by preventing sensational display, both exhibitions strive to give human remains the respect that is advised by ethical and professional guidelines. The National Museum of Health and Medicine seems to face more challenges than *Written in Bone*, partly due to the nature of the museum. For the most part, the exhibits at NMHM are on permanent display, while the *Written in Bone* exhibition is temporary.[45] Thus, NMHM has had to constantly adapt its exhibitions to changing standards, and it is evident that it is still a work in progress. The 2002 New York Times article noted that in recent years, the Museum has changed its displays and "put away more of its gruesome artifacts and edged further into the museum mainstream."[46] The National Museum of Health and Medicine is aware of the challenges in displaying human remains, and has attempted to make the necessary adjustments. Ethical guidelines and museum practice are constantly changing, and the National Museum of Health and Medicine, as well as the *Written in Bone* exhibition, have adapted well by creating sensitive displays.

## Conclusion

Displaying human remains in the museum is controversial, but necessary. Exhibitions of human remains in the museum can be educational and enlightening, and the power of their

[44] Ibid.
[45] Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, 1.
[46] Ault.

presence in the museum is incomparable. Authenticity in the museum is expected by visitors, but the accommodation of this expectation should not be the sole defense for museums wishing to display human remains. Instead, museums need to consider if exhibitions fall within established ethical guidelines that advise not only that museums display remains respectfully, but that these displays are contextualized and presented in a professional manner. As noted before, the intentional vagueness of these guidelines can lead to a variety of interpretations. As such, any stance that museums take should be clearly communicated, both in the interpretation of the exhibitions as well as their policies on human remains. Those museums that do not possess such policies, however, should consider creating statements that clearly define current practices and proposed guidelines. By making policies and exhibitions transparent and honest, museums can effectively continue to allow visitors to view human remains in the museum.

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