Sharing ethics of displaying human remains in museums

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Abstract. Human remains have a unique status within museum collections and raise several multifaceted and complex ethical and legal issues. The personal, cultural, symbolic, spiritual or religious significance they have for individuals and groups bears a particular responsibility on the museums in the way they are acquired, handled, and displayed. Human remains may also have the potential to contribute to the culture and common good, through research, teaching and, in a respectful mode, exhibitions. As a valuable resource, they actively encourage personal and community reflection on humanity's shared heritage. As protagonists of an historical revision process, scientific collections can play a significant role in challenging prejudices and stereotypes of the past. They may foster the change and promote a deeper understanding of different cultural perspectives and practices, supporting equality and inclusion, and encouraging a policy open to participation and discussion on choices, in a close relationship with local communities. In a complex and ever-changing world, museums need to ensure respect for the different ways of interpreting nature and human history by engaging with all stakeholders. This includes ethical issues related to the provenance of objects, acquisition, care, interpretation, display, and request for restitution, as well as a commitment by museums to stimulate constructive debate and consultation among the native people belonging the remains.

Key words: ethics, anthropology of health, human remains, museum, bio-history, scientific racism

Introduction

Science museums all over the world preserve mummies, skeletal remains, anatomical specimens, grave goods and sacred objects, together with ethnographic materials and artefacts, as the result of more than two centuries of collecting and scientific study. These collections are of inestimable value in the reconstruction and interpretation of our biological, paleo-demographic and cultural history (1). However, human remains, have very specific characteristics that set them apart from other remains and raise many important ethical issues regarding their recovery, detention, preservation, treatment and management (2, 3).

The growing attention for the special nature of these findings has required the need to subject any activity of managing human remains to the prior *consensus* of different groups of subjects who are involved in various ways.

Research projects, excavation permits and access to repositories are strictly controlled by government and museum bodies, tribal representatives and indigenous committees. From this collaborative and consensual effort comes not only a much more active and participatory engagement with the descendant communities, but also a deeper understanding of the human remains themselves.

The study of ancient and historical human remains includes all possible reconstructions of anthropological,

cultural and environmental variables that are essential for their interpretation and understanding. Incorporating the multiplicity of different perspectives engages multiple disciplines (anthropology, bioarchaeology, osteology, palaeopathology) in the aim of understanding human behaviour in an evolutionary context that integrates information from human remains (such as age at death, sex, stature, pathology, physiology and trauma) with other aspects of the environment and culture (population density, environmental factors, climate patterns, local food sources, housing and family structure). In this necessarily articulated and complex approach, anatomy, epidemiology, nutrition, geosciences, linguistics and demography also reveal important dimensions of human life history.

Practising research on human remains also requires a significant ethical commitment to offer a perspective that, crossing time and space, also could encourage to frame current problems (poverty, famine, discrimination, racism, resource depletion, environmental degradation) in a broader cultural perspective, respectful of human diversity that is not always adequately considered (4). By highlighting the plasticity of human behaviour, research on remains can also explain how many of the problems are historically situated and culturally constructed, and thus can challenge current issues with non-Western approaches and broader perspectives.

As pointed out Armelagos, "[...] can provide insights that are essential for understanding our relationship to our environment, how we interacted with it throughout history, and how we are interacting with it now" (5).

Research involving human remains must therefore require a broad and articulate engagement - at every level - with the context in which human remains and artefacts are related.

Their inclusion in the *Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums* (ICOM) as "culturally sensitive materials" and the consequent imposition of special rules point out the high degree of responsibility associated with their possession, treatment and management, also with regard to the feelings, beliefs and customs of the community to which they belong.

The aim of this work is to stimulate reflection on a field of investigation which, at least in Italy, is still partly lacking (6, 7).

Exposed bodies, contested bodies

In the current cultural, social and economic context, there is a need for a critical review of the current role of the museum institution, today far removed from that of the colonialist past of which many Western museums have been active protagonists and interpreters.

The growing awareness of the need for an ethical perspective on collecting and collections, particularly when ethically "sensitive" objects are present (human remains, religious or ceremonial objects, or objects of historical heritage), requires a dialogue between museum authorities and the plurality and otherness of the histories, values, and highly symbolic meanings that such objects contain.

To this day, a controversy is still going on around the remains of the Irish Giant, Charles Byrne (8), kept in the *Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons* in London, between those who maintain that the body should remain at the disposal of science and the museum and those who would like to give the young Irishman (whose skeleton is 2 metres and 54 centimetres high), who died at the age of only 22, the burial in the sea that he requested to his friends. The current controversy arises precisely from the moral acceptability that a choice, such as that of displaying the remains of the young Byrne, does not seem to respect. Of course, more than two centuries have passed since Byrne's death. Today, in many countries (including Italy) where the advance directives of people are fully recognised, a new question arises: until 'when' can this recognition be granted? Is there a time limit defining the maximum duration beyond which such wishes, expressed during life, become irrelevant? Do scientific knowledge prevail over the will of the individual after his or her death?

The long and tortuous path towards equality on the part of minorities, the growth of migratory flows that urge us to interact constantly with people from other countries (and therefore with different cultures, religions, existential parameters, moral codes), the extension of the notions of multiculturalism and interculturalism, and also the moral unacceptability of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or religious belief, complicate the confrontation with the set of

cultural values that can guide moral reflection on the body of the living, as well as that of the deceased and its uses.

The debates and ethical questions about Gunther von Hagens' exhibitions of plastinated bodies in *Body Worlds*, rather than exhibitions of mummies or anatomical remains, are expressive of the different sensitivities and meanings such events can assume (3).

On 6 March 2002, after much debate and contention, France accepted the return of the remains of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called 'Hottentot Venus', born 1789 in the Karoo region of South Africa. After having been kidnapped and enslaved, the young woman was exhibited as a living attraction throughout England, where by exposing her naked buttocks (she suffered from steatopygia) and her small lips (macronymphia) she attracted multitudes of spectators, feeding the diffused racism of the first half of the 19th Century (9). When Saartjie Baartman died, Georges Cuvier, naturalist and comparative anatomy research at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, dissected the body of the young woman died prematurely. The display of the woman's genitals in the collections of the then Musée d'Ethnographie, later renamed Musée de l'Homme, as macabre evidence of the late evolution of 'primitive peoples', offers an analysis of the violence and aberrations of scientific racism in evolutionist Europe at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 19th century (10-12). The science of the time, influenced by positivism, claimed to demonstrate from the young woman's features, unusual for the European population, the inferiority of the African Negroid, who was catalogued by Cuvier as "the most degenerate human type". This aspect, according to Cuvier, was close to that of the beast and its intelligence was "insufficient to arrive at regular forms of administration" (10). On the skull of Saartjie Baartma, Cuvier identified a crushing, a characteristic which he believed condemned the woman and her people "to eternal subordination"" (10). In 2002, following international diplomatic pressure and the approval of a specific law by the French Government, the Musée de l'Homme accepted the request of the South African Government for the restitution of the remains of the "Venus" (13).

The fate of this African woman reminds the destiny of El Negro de Banyoles, a native of the area around Cape Town, whose stuffed body had attracted the curiosity of a large, paying European public. From the letter that the French botanist and naturalist Jules Pierre Verreaux wrote to Cuvier on 12 May 1831, we learn of the imminent shipment of a rich collection of objects from South Africa that included, in addition to fish, reptiles, birds and rare animals, an 'object', considered by the French merchant to be of particular interest, that is, a stuffed beciuana in an excellent state of preservation which, during the night, had been furtively unearthed by young Jules together with his uncle from a cemetery in Cape Town, where it had been buried and where it was guarded by his family (14). Thus, in the letter dated 12 May 1831, Jules Verreaux, describes to Georges Cuvier, the director of the Paris Museum the finding of the particular "object": Un objet qui n 'est pas Ie moins interessant de notre collection, est un bouchouana prepare et fort bien conserve et qui failli m 'a coute la vie, etant oblige pour les obtenir d 'aller les deterrer la nuit dans les lieux garde par leurs semblables. (A translation of the passage above into English would be: "An object which is not the least interesting in our collection is a stuffed beciuana which is very well preserved and which was about to cause my death, because in order to get it I was obliged to disinter it at night in places guarded by his fellows" (15, 16).

The man, about 27 years old, belonging to the southern African ethnic group, with characteristics typical of African bushmen, was stuffed like a hunting trophy, using wire as a backbone he had been nailed to a pedestal in a vigilant pose, with a spear and shield clutched in his hands. He wore a leather skirt and a raffia headdress. His mortal remains were preserved and exhibited at the Palais d'Industrie in Paris, then in 1916 they were acquired by the Darder Museum of Natural History in the city of Banyoles, Catalonia. The exhibition of this 'trophy' was a major attraction.

Charles Lyell, a famous Scottish geologist, highlights the racial perspective of the 18th and 19th centuries: "The brain of the Bushman (...) leads to the brain of the Simiadae (monkeys). This implies a connection between want of intelligence and structural assimilation. Each race of a Man has its place, like the inferior animals" (17).

In 1992, the year of the Olympic Games in Barcelona, international public opinion began to strongly

criticise the detention of this relic, a typical expression of the racist colonialism that has accompanied the history of many Western museums and their policies based on the cultural superiority of the European powers.

In 2000, the man's remains were taken from the Spanish museum and sent to Tsholofelo Park in Gaborone (Botswana) for burial, which is not the man's native country, while the young warrior's spear was left in the Catalan town of Banyoles and the skin in Madrid.

Westerman describes the serious state of neglect of the El Negro tomb whose ornamental posts painted in Botswana's national colours -blue, white and black- were used as a fence to mark out a football field. It was only in 2014 that this tomb was restored and an explanatory panel was placed (14). In his book "El Negro and I", Westerman writes: "El Negro mercilessly mirrors Europe's view of the rest of the world: the way we looked at it and look at it betrays our thinking about race and identity" (14).

Of course, the Hottentot Venus and El Negro are not the only cases of 'human artefacts' and colonial trophies on display in Western museums that animate public discussion (18).

The Age of Reason had begun and, everywhere in Europe, natural history museums began to replace the "Wunderkammer" (the "chambers of wonder" or "cabinets of curiosities") in which collectors from the 16th to the 18th century used to keep collections of objects that were extraordinary because of their intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics (3).

Stories of racism, discrimination, injustice and brutality have crossed the whole of Europe and also Italy, where the conflicts, especially between the North and the South of the country and the severe socio-economic inequalities of the post-unification period, together with the brutality of the repressions, were legitimised by the anthropological schools of the time, of which Cesare Lombroso was an authoritative exponent.

In Italy, the celebrated skull of Villella, on which Lombroso constructed the famous thesis of the atavism, today, completely disavowed and abandoned by the scientific community, continues to be the object of serious debate (19).

In the Anatomical Museum in Modena, the body of a man of Ethiopian nationality, known as Peter Lerpi, is still on display. We know that he worked for the Dukes of Modena as a musician and died of pneumonia at the age of 28 on 24 October 1831. His embalmed body was put on display at the time by Domenico Alfonso Bignardi (1770-1837), professor of human anatomy at the Royal University of Modena. The same museum also keeps in a glass case a Nubian woman, originally from the area between Egypt and Sudan, who died at the age of 25 in 1886 (14).

The result is stories of nineteenth-century scientific racism that can offer today a key to critical review and the opportunity for reconciliation with our not always edifying past, which also put knowledge or, better, pseudo-science before respect for the person and for diversity.

Who does the past belong to? Voices from museums

These events, like the many others involving artefacts and trophies still preserved in museums all over the world and intertwined with the increasingly frequent stories of restitution (such as that of the "tête Maori" at the Museum of Natural History in Rouen, the mummy of Ramesses the Great to Egypt by the *Carlos Museum* of *Emory University* in Atlanta, the restitution to Botswana of the so-called "El Negro de Banyoles"; the restitution to the Tasmanian aborigines of the remains of their ancestors by the *Royal College of Surgeon Museum of* the English University of Oxford) are emblematic of the ethical dilemmas and the plurality of values that revolve around ethically "sensitive" findings, such as human remains, religious or ceremonial objects, or objects of historical-cultural heritage with a strongly symbolic value, which create or consolidate a sense of belonging (20, 21).

The needs of research and science address with the demands of those who consider the detention and display of such remains in museums around the world to be unacceptable and claim their return.

Following an appeal promoted by Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, in relation to the strong pressure put forward by Greece for the repatriation of the so-called Elgin Marbles (also known as the Parthenon Marbles), 19 among the most important European and North American museums

signed the "Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums," on 9th December 2004, which authorised them to possess and exhibit the heritages of the whole world, available almost universally, also thanks to itinerant exhibitions (22).

In an interview with the Guardian in July 2004, MacGregor explained that the British Museum's universality stemmed from the sheer quality and variety of its collections, which told the story of all humanity. Consequently, this universality gave the museum the authority to represent, in a *super partes* position, all cultures, regardless of particular views, political aims or national identities, but for the benefit of the whole world.

The document, advocated by these museums established between the 18th and 19th centuries, emphasises their role in disseminating knowledge and enhancing the value of their heritages by making them accessible to a wide international public which, if these works had remained in their original locations, would have been excluded.

In the Declaration, the international museum community explicitly "shares the conviction that illegal traffic in archaeological artistic, and ethnic objects must be firmly discouraged" (22). However, this document underlines that "We should, however, recognize that objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era". Refuting repatriation proposals, the Declaration states the mission of museums to "foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation" (22). In this context, it has been underlined how the increased attention towards the original context of the works cannot make us forget the validity of the museum context which has allowed the fruition of the goods kept in it by an international public (23).

Concerns about the multiplication of requests for restitution from all over the world prompted a rapid signing of the Declaration. However, the Declaration, aimed at highlighting the role of museums as "agents in the development of culture", also drew severe criticism.

George Abungu, former director of the National Museums of Kenya, raised the question of the reason why universal museums are only found in Europe and North America, underlining the necessity not to equivocate in the interpretation of the Declaration the concept of universality with that of globalisation (24).

Mark O'Neill made a severe criticism of this statement, Director of Glasgow Museums, Director of Glasgow Museum, affirming "the validity of universal values is a vital issue in many disciplines, from sociology to aesthetics, human rights to philosophy. The underlying challenge is to identify universals which are not simply projections of western cultural values. If museums were capable of helping to devise and communicate a universal perspective on cultural values which achieves credibility and currency outside western cultural elites, they would indeed make an invaluable contribution to global society" (25).

In his article *Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global?* O'Neill denounces the critical issues of the communication strategies of museum institutions' exhibitions aimed at affirming the civic mission of Western collecting and its ability to give the right value to artefacts from other cultures, as a defence against repatriation claims.

The universality of the museum institution should imply the capacity to make (re)emerge and also make explicit within it the issues of power relations and cultural controversies, respecting and valuing the plurality and different points of view and interpretations, so that the slogan "seeing the world as one" does not merely "achieves little more than a Coke or Benetton advertisement, portraying humanity [...] as one big happy family" (25).

Moreover, this Declaration seemed to generate a boomerang effect. The so-called Victim Countries (e.g. Egypt, Greece, countries of Latin America and the Middle East, Italy) multiplied their demands for the return of their cultural goods to the Market States (USA, Japan, Western European countries) (23).

Berenice Murphy, chair of the ICOM Ethics Committee, proposed a "digital repatriation", i.e. a widespread digitalisation campaign that would enable all citizens of plundered countries to enjoy their heritage once again by viewing it online (26).

Certainly, claims for the repatriation of ethically 'sensitive' artefacts such as human remains, religious or ceremonial objects, which represent the cultural and intellectual dignity of communities subjected to the violence of colonisation aimed at marginalising

indigenous peoples, erasing their identity and destroying their cultural fabric, even to the point of genocide, raise particular ethical issues.

New sensitivity, new responsibilities and new orientations

In this critical context emerges the responsibility, the dialoguing, and collaborative role of the contemporary museum institution as a place of promoting intercultural dialogue, critical review and reconciliation in a multi-ethnic society (26).

The right of museums to continue to conserve, study and display collections, which come from a past of coercion and oppression, is very well exposed by sociologist Tiffany Jenkins, in her *Keeping their marbles: How treasures of the past ended up in museums and why they should stay* there. She argues that the return or repatriation of artifacts (including human remains) to countries or peoples who claim more rightful ownership of them will not achieve the desired social change, let alone repair the wounds of history, because "no individual or group can own culture or a culture, thus no individual or group has exclusive rights to any cultural artifacts" (27). This reflection compares with the willingness, described by the historian, Samuel Redman, in his *Bone rooms: From scientific racism to human prehistory in museums*, to open a collaborative approach with the communities of origin, with particular attention to what has happened in the museums of anthropology and medicine in the United States (28).

While traditionally the acquisition, preservation and display of artefacts has been the main function of museums, today, the focus in these cultural institutions has progressively shifted towards dialogue with the community and the narration of the life paths and stories behind the collections. Through a severe critical revision of the cultural and historical pathway related to the artefact**,** museums explore new forms of inclusive mediation, which are themselves an interesting educational strategy.

As social institutions, embedded in the cultural fabric of the community, museums reflect the values, beliefs, customs and ideologies of the society in which they are rooted. To the extent that they prove to be institutions of dialogue, attentiveness, "porosity" and synergy, museums too evolve in accordance with the profound changes that society goes through. Not only do they, together with other cultural institutions, not only reflect the changes in society, but they are able to intervene as places of intercultural dialogue and negotiation.

The result is a physical and metaphorical place that, while still full of shadows from a past of oppression, abuse and prejudice, tells with a new role, who we are, our history, our identity, our mistakes, our aspirations and our personal and collective projections, and which can become the future memory of the values that represent us today.

In this context, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drawn up following the atrocities and abuses perpetrated during the Second World War, is of primary importance. It sets out fundamental human rights, such as respect, coexistence, brotherhood, peace, dignity and the value of the person.

Recognition and appreciation of human rights and respect for other cultures now strongly challenge the traditional view of Western science as expressed in historical museum exhibitions.

In the delicate relationship with 'other' peoples and cultures, particular importance is also attached to the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, unanimously adopted in Paris on 2 November 2001, which states in Article 3: "The defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for the dignity of the human person. It implies a commitment to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples. No one may invoke cultural diversity to threaten human rights guaranteed by international law or to limit their scope. Again, it establishes: "Cultural heritage, as the main source of creativity" in all its forms" must therefore be "preserved (...), enhanced, and transmitted to future generations as a testimony to the experience and aspirations of humanity, in order to nurture creativity in all its diversity and to foster genuine intercultural dialogue".

These documents, together with the 2004 ICOM Code (the Code is under further revision by the international community of museum professionals), provide the coordinates for the use of scientific collections

to engage local communities, make historical revisions, and question the current meaning of their display and appropriate use in relation to their nineteenth-century origins and their close association with the history of Western colonialism of which museums have been an expression for centuries.

UNESCO recommends the social role of museums and their function as agents of social cohesion, acting as places which are open to all. Of crucial importance is ensuring "that museums and related institutions fulfil their fundamental functions such as preservation, research, communication and education, as well as contribute to the advancement of societies by fostering peace, human rights, and gender equality" (29).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the treatment, detention and display of human remains point out a great moral responsibility for dealing with several ethical and legal questions that result from the different instances involved.

The complexity of the issues encourages all educational institutions offering appropriate tools for analysis, comparison, and intercultural dialogue capable of generating and promoting bonds of inclusion, tolerance and solidarity, in a perspective of mutual enrichment.

Emphasising core values, such as respect for the person, the protection of the identity of different persons and willingness to engage to dialogue, enhances the distinctives features of the various cultures and stimulates a critical reflection on one's own culture, history, and values.

Museums can also play an important educational role, not only in producing knowledge, but also in promoting integration and constructive coexistence in today's multifaceted and globalised cultural and social fabric.

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