

Exploring the humanities

Assignment 1 – Alexander Iye

In recent years, museums around the world have begun to confront the ethical controversy of displaying human remains. A recent example is Manchester Museum's publicly asking whether to continue exhibiting the mummified body of Asru who has had her remains be part of the museum's collection since the 1820s and have now sparked a debate about the dignity and humanity owed to individuals whose bodies are treated as objects of interest. This reflects a broader movement in the field of archaeology and related disciplines to revisit museum practices, especially those rooted in colonial legacies and to consider alternatives such as more respectful forms of presentation. As institutions and different disciplines like Philosophy and Anthropology grapple with these questions, the case of Asru invites people to understand the moral responsibilities involved in disciplines such as archaeology.

The Manchester Museum has also asked the public for their opinions the museum director states "We want to be transparent about the process and involve people in the decisions we make. Museums have to confront uncomfortable histories and ethical dilemmas." (Esme Ward to the guardian, 2025) this shows a shift towards accountability for past actions and communicating that to the world.

The conversation surrounding this topic brings up many points like the dignity of the individuals, the lack of consent, and the colonial legacy surrounding Asru and the relationship between an Egyptian mummy in a British museum This conversation isn't just about one mummy it is part of a broader conversation with how we treat the dead, whose stories are told, and who gets to tell them. This also can be seen in the United States with the struggle of people in similar situations such as the Native Americans struggle against the display of ancestral and cultural artifacts being on display regardless of the significance to their respective cultures.

But this is a problem faced all over the world from here in the UK all the way to Australia the reason for the displaying of human remains is that it is a positive for education which does make sense but on the other side many of these remains have been acquired through time periods where other countries were suffering from colonialism.

There is improvement in these areas such as the US returning many of the native peoples remains upon request but many still are being held for study because of the US federal law requiring federally funded institutes to inventory Native American remains. Here in the UK, we still struggle with our past as a colonial superpower making it hard to return remains to the nations, they are originally from the UK has no law or mandate to involve the individuals' country of origin, and the choice is left to each museum. An example of this is individual Charles Byrne also known as the Irish giant a man from the 18th century who before his death requested to be buried at sea but against his wishes his body had been procured by a surgeon named John Hunter. Hunter

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had reduced Byrnes' remains to just his skeleton and put him on display at The Hunterian Museum in London as the central exhibit his remains are no longer available for public viewing as an acknowledgement of the ethical concerns but they are still being held for the purpose of researching his remains particularly in understanding his conditions like acromegaly and gigantism, conditions caused by a tumour.

Despite the ethical concerns, the Hunterian Museum legally owns his remains again as the UK has no law requiring repatriation or burial. This case is a haunting example of how institutions can override personal wishes in the name of the greater good.

The dignity around displaying human remains is inherently dehumanizing even from the point of education because it looks at the remains as something to be studied they can not consent to being displayed but it infringes on the dignity of the individual and highlights the colonial past of western nations weather it is in the case of Asru or the many relatives on native American tribes people.

The display of human remains in museums is not a simple decision it is a profound act that reverberates across many disciplines from both natural and social science benefiting our collective knowledge and understanding the people of the past. How we treat the dead, whose stories we preserve, and whose dignity we need to uphold are being failed because of how they help expand our knowledge and whether they can prove to be useful to the living.

Our ethics provide the moral lens through which we question consent, cultural sensitivity, and institutional accountability. But it is through history, anthropology, archaeology and psychology that we understand the deeper narratives these remains carry from colonial violence towards marginalised groups, scientific ambition disregarding the individual, and the human desire to understand.

The purpose of a museum is in part to tell stories of the past to put people in the place and time that is being told and as part of that story treating the stewardship of remains as a task, that we need to benefit from is wrong but consensus is shifting towards the idea that repatriation is a necessary act of restitution. By affirming the humanity of those whose bodies have been objectified or studied and restores agency to the communities from which they were taken.

In returning remains to their rightful origins, we do more than correct past wrongs we reshape the future of cultural stewardship with empathy, integrity, and respect.

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