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RESEARCH AND MUSEUM ENHANCEMENT IN HUMAN REMAINS COLLECTIONS A CASE STUDY

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SUMMARY

RESEARCH AND MUSEUM ENHANCEMENT IN HUMAN REMAINS COLLECTIONS. A CASE STUDY

Nowadays, the role of human remains in museum collections has profoundly changed due to new scientific investigation possibilities offered by modern methods and a trans-disciplinary approach to reconstructing biological and cultural phenomena of ancient societies. In this perspective, museums must play a central role in communicating the knowledge stemming from science beyond the scientific community, in order to enhance interest in scientific disciplines among the young. In the experience of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin, multidisciplinary scientific research and a trans-disciplinary collaborative approach are providing a suitable key for new communication strategies.

Key words: Anthropological collections - Research - Storytelling - Transdisciplinary research

1. Introduction

Until recent times, collections of human remains have been considered as a legacy of the past, as a reminder of anthropological and paleopathological studies with outdated methods and objectives. Today, advanced scientific techniques in the investigation of human remains and a trans-disciplinary collaborative approach among scientists have opened a new window in the study of past populations. Currently, researchers are applying their newfound skills to handling ancient materials for reconstructing past biological phenomena as part of people's identity[1]. As a consequence, human collections have acquired new roles in anthropological and paleopathological research as well as in Museums exhibitions. New attention is needed to safeguard them for the future, and new communication strategies must be developed.

To date, human remains belonging to public collections are protected by Cultural Heritage regulations[2]. Due to their high symbolic, emotional, cultural and religious value, they are deemed to be '*culturally sensitive find*s'[3,4]. Nevertheless, the *status* of 'human remains' is not well defined and there are no specific regulations governing their possession, study and display in museum collections. Within the scientific community, the debate on human remains and ethical issues is intense and some European museums (e.g. the British Museum) have adopted internal guidelines for the management of human remains from archaeological contexts[5].

In Italy, the issue has been the subject of numerous debates sparked off by the request to the Italian Government (Ministry of Culture) from the Australian Government to return some human skeletal remains from Australia held in the Anthropology and Ethnology Section of the Museum of Natural History of the University of Florence. A document issued in 2011 on this request is the first step in a process aimed at establishing a constructive discussion for a correct interpretation and use of human collections[6]. Moreover, an inter-

esting analysis of museological issues is outlined by Monza e Licata with particular attention to anatomical preparations for which, unlike archaeological human remains[7], museum guidelines are lacking.

2. Human remains collections

Human remains have been collected for scientific purposes since the 18th century by scholars with the aim of documenting, studying, and showing human anatomy, variability, and our evolutionary and biological history. These specimens are part of anatomo-pathological, cemetery and archaeological collections that include both 'numerous specimens' to glean objective scientific data, and 'standard specimens' for the teaching of gross and comparative anatomy. Over time, human remains have been used to formulate hypotheses, support scientific theories, or simply reinforce teaching activities and comparative procedures, aimed to develop anthropological methods[8]. Their scientific and educational purpose distinguish these collections from both the sacred ones – built to remember the sacredness of the body (relics) and religious symbolisms (*memento mori)* –, and from those assembled in the pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment period according to pseudoscientific criteria established to show bodies as 'curiosity' in order to gain admiration and amazement. These latter collections were not preserved from getting lost in generic Museums or from destruction.

Anatomo-pathological collections drew less and less interest during the 20th century, due to the emergence of diagnostic imaging techniques: anatomical findings were no longer the 'object of comparison' and, consequently, many of them were lost or destroyed[9]. Meanwhile, anthropological collections (modern identified skeletons and archaeological remains) still provide an important research support in the study of modern and ancient populations[10]. Despite the important role they play in research, human remains have for a long time been considered 'accessory elements' in anthropological

disciplines, increasingly focused on the study of population genetics and molecular biology applied to modern populations.

3. Taking human collections into the future

Since the last decades of the 20th century, anthropological collections have been enjoying new interest thanks to new investigation possibilities offered by modern methods and a trans-disciplinary approach[11]. An unprecedented access to the past is offered by molecular biology (DNA and proteomics) applied to the study of ancient remains. Investigations are carried out in order to evaluate issues related to biology, health/disease, subsistence, mobility/migration, epidemiology, microbiome, environmental changes and their impact on human/animal populations in the past[12]. Thus, they are opening the possibility to new-generation scientific research (-omics) to enter into museums (museomics) and create new synergies for research, conservation, and enhancement of human remains[13].

One of the roles of Museums today is to spread this new knowledge to the largest number of people possible, by conveying the scientific results of trans-disciplinary investigations through a new educational-informative approach such as 'storytelling'. Already widely used by many scientific museums, storytelling has constantly evolved in its narrative and today can adapt different stories to different audiences, thus increasing the number of narrative experiences[14]. In this sector, ethnographic museums have a 10-year experience in participatory narratives. An example from the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of Turin is the project funded in 2008 by a private foundation and entitled "Language to Language. A Collaborative Exhibition", which used storytelling as a tool to illustrate some items in the Ethnographic collection using an intercultural dialogue. This project was informed by Clifford's theory of museums being like a "contact zone"[15]: some selected objects on display were reinterpreted with direct involvement of migrant communities thanks to a

participatory process. The project aimed to transform the Museum into a multivocal representation space, where the institutional, scientific and educational language would engage in a dialogue with the autobiographical, evocative and emotional language[16].

Following these experiences that have opened a dialogue with the public for a collaborative approach, the challenge is to leverage human remains in Museums creating a 'life narrative' for each individual as a sort of 'osteobiography'[17]. An ethical approach to this narrative and adequate and in-depth cultural contents can become key elements in the dialogue between the past and the present, the dead and the living, in a space (the museum) where human life, in its most universal form, is shown in a true, face-to-face manner[18].

Life narrative could be considered as a biography of objects[19] that collect all information available from a single individual in order to explore and reconstruct their natural and cultural 'life experiences' (sex and age, health and illness, diet, environmental and biomechanical stresses, cultural constructs, etc.) as well as 'museum experiences' (acquisition, recovery, restoration, conservation, exhibition, etc). This approach includes anthropological, historical, and archaeological research in order to place the remains in a natural and social context. Moreover, human remains are linked to museum inventories and other written or photographic documents (i.e. diaries, letters, photos, past exhibitions, etc.), in order to reconstruct their 'second life in the museum'. In this way, the Museum creates a contact zone where natural and cultural history of human remains enter into contact with the history of scientific institutions and with the 'individual stories' of visitors. Different cultures meet (geographically and temporally) and try to come to terms with each other to create a bridge between the past and the present by promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding, respect, and mutual integration.

In the process of 'contemporization' of medical and anthropological museums technologies are employed to help show and contextual-

ize the most 'disturbing remains', so that they are not seen simply as morbid curiosities[20] or oddity. A substantial contribution can be made by digital technology, in order to solve the problem of objectification of remains, especially if pathological specimens "have become just an object displayed at the exhibition"[21]. As regards medical collections, it is necessary to take into consideration that "the medical object not only conveys knowledge and meaning but its form carries and generates emotions that help humanise medicine" [22]. For this reason, as Thomas Schanlkes states, "it is necessary to create specific media and contexts of training with 'objects'. So, all resources, especially those related to digitisation, are welcome"[23].
Storytelling has evolved with interactive digital media and the new model of 'transmedia storytelling' has found conditions to develop in museums[24]. The term was coined by Henry Jenkins in his book 'Convergence of Culture'. He defined it as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story"[25].
Although transmedia storytelling has been applied in a very basic and limited way, it has been a part of museums for years, as evidenced by the Egyptian Museum of Turin where interactive digital media are usually integrated in permanent and temporary exhibitions[26].

4. Case study from the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin

We briefly report a recent activity in studying and displaying human remains carried out by the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography.
A mummified young woman dated to 2407-2199 BC was discovered in Gebelein (South Egypt) at the beginning of last century during the Italian Archaeological Mission directed by Ernesto Schiaparelli

(1856-1928). The mummy, the wooden sarcophagus and the funerary kit were sent to the Egyptian Museum of Turin and then, due to its important anthropological value, designated to the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, directed by Giovanni Marro (1875-1952).

The individual's body is an excellent and unique specimen of Egyptian mummification practices in the Old Kingdom: the body is partially wrapped, and it wears a pleated dress over the bandages. At the beginning of this century, the mummy was CT scanned and over 1200 cross-sectional images were obtained at 1-25 mm intervals and 3D reconstructions were performed in order to create a three-dimensional rendering of the body. This analysis has made it possible to carry out the 'first virtual unwrapping and autopsy' on an Egyptian mummy at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. Moreover, anthropological and paleopathological studies were conducted, as well as chemical analysis and radiocarbon dating[27]. More recently, paleo proteomic analysis has confirmed good tissue preservation and further chemical analysis revealed the presence of a plant resin from *Pinaceae,* as embalming substance. After more than four thousand years, it was possible to answer many questions about her life and death[28].

Since June 2020 she has been displayed at the Egyptian Museum of Turin in the temporary exhibition titled 'The Anthropologist's Gaze'. The exhibition allows visitors to stand in front of her looking at her through a small window, separated by a temporary wall: the audience chooses whether to approach the mummy, going beyond the partition, or not (Fig.1 here). This communication strategy makes appropriate use of cultural contents, in full respect of the mummy and the visitor, both of them at the centre of the Museum's attention. The studies carried out on the mummy and reported on the wall tell her life story. Moreover, some of the most significant ethnographic objects of the Museum have been included in the exhibition in order to contextual-

Fig. 1. The mummy at the exhibition "The Anthropologist's Gaze" (Egyptian Museum of Turin, Italy, 13 June 2020 – 31 January 2021).

ize the mummy's display both in the cultural period of its discovery and in the museum context in which it was incorporated, as an anthropologist's gaze towards otherness in the early 20th century. The display also includes a 'current gaze' by the anthropologist underlining the need for dialogue with migrant communities. The words of young Africans living in Turin are inserted in the dialogue with the contemporary anthropologist, through some interviews. Different languages emerge at the end of the itinerary, as well as the need for a comparison with peoples who had been impoverished during the colonial period[29].

5. Conclusion

Human remains are irreplaceable biological and cultural archives. New possibilities of scientific investigation offered by modern methods, and a trans-disciplinary approach make it possible to integrate biological and cultural data in order to investigate human health and social behaviour in modern and ancient populations. Consequently, museums play an important role in conveying this knowledge to a

wide and non-specialist audience, in order to enhance the interest in scientific disciplines among young people.

The topic regarding human remains is an articulated subject with close links with human life, human experiences of life in past societies, and deep ethical implications. It is therefore a priority that this issue be addressed in such a way as to create a 'gentle' comparison with visitors who observe human remains in museums.

In order to effectively connect with their audiences, over time, museums have used appropriate cultural content, and targeted and effective communication strategies to translate scientific and specialist knowledge into a simple and straightforward language, understandable to all. Some experiences in participatory narratives from ethnographic museums have produced good ideas. Moreover, interactive digital media, storytelling and 'transmedia storytelling' offer new attractive and interactive experiences in Museums that could involve their audiences at different levels of attention and emotion. In this light, the temporary exhibition presented as a case study highlights a solution that aims to demonstrate the museum's attention to the mummy and the public, both protected from accidental and non-respectful contacts.

In the experience of the Museum of Anthropology, multidisciplinary scientific research and a trans-disciplinary collaborative approach are providing a suitable key for new communication strategies.

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