

MOJCA RAMŠAK¹

Human Remains in Slovenian Museums and Memorial Sites

Abstract: The article deals with different types of human remains exhibited in Slovenian museums or memorials, educational institutions and other places in Slovenia. It presents the typology of human remains, the legal framework and the ethical guidelines for their respectful handling. At the same time, the author points out that Slovenia has no challenges with repatriation requests, as historically it was not a dominant colonial power that would accumulate its collections in this way.

Keywords: human remains, museum, material culture, ethics, Slovenia

Človeški posmrtni ostanki v slovenskih muzejih in na spominskih krajih

Izvleček: Članek obravnava različne zvrsti človeških posmrtnih ostankov, ki so na ogled v slovenskih muzejih ali spominskih krajih, v izobraževalnih ustanovah in drugih prostorih v Sloveniji. Predstavi tipologijo človeških ostankov, pravni okvir in etične smernice, ki urejajo spoštljivo ravnanje z njimi. Ob tem poudarja, da Slovenija nima izzivov pri zahtevkih za repatriacijo, saj zgodovinsko gledano ni šlo za prevladujočo kolonialno silo, ki bi si na ta način kopičila svoje zbirke.

Ključne besede: človeški ostanki, muzej, materialna kultura, etika, Slovenija

¹Dr. Mojca Ramšak, University of Ljubljana and AMEU-ISH. E-mail: mojca.ramsak@guest.arnes.si

Introduction

Various professionals in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, medicine (anatomy, transplant surgery), people considering donating their bodies for scientific purposes, as well as those looking for alternative burial methods for their loved ones, show a common fascination with the use of human remains, sometimes referred to as archaeological or anatomical specimens, anatomical preparations or simply artefacts.

Research into human remains and their context are an important source of direct evidence about the past, including: human evolution and adaptation, and genetic relationships; population relationships through genetics and morphology; past demography and health; diet, growth and activity patterns; disease and causes of death; history of disease and of medicine; burial practices, beliefs and attitudes; the diversity of cultural practices in which the body and its parts are used (Guidance 2005, 8).

The human body and the corpse have been objects of admiration, veneration and curiosity, as evidenced by prehistoric burials, belief in the afterlife, embalming procedures, death masks and sarcophagi, tombs and necropolis with rich grave goods, and many other rituals related to the afterlife that testify to the importance attributed to the body or its remains. In Christianity, the cult of relics, i.e., the veneration of the posthumous bodily and other remains of saints, was important. Pilgrims, church dignitaries and rulers sought out objects and body parts of individual martyrs and saints, which were kept in reliquaries in churches and monasteries. In addition to the most famous relics such as the Shroud of Turin, the tunic of Mary and the cross of Christ, objects of veneration also included the head of John the Baptist, Saint Fortunat's thighbone, and hundreds of bones and body parts supposedly belonging to the saints were also amongst the objects of veneration. The cata-

combs, where the human remains have been kept since antiquity, were joined by the carefully rendered ossuaries where the human bones and body parts were used to construct the furniture and decoration instead of the classical artistic media and materials. Many of them are considered to be the true works of art (Zupanič Slavec 2015, 9).

There are many different types of human remains in museums around the world. We already find them in cabinets of curiosities from the 16th and 17th centuries, in museums on the history of medicine, in ethnographic and archaeological collections, in private collections, in criminological or forensic museums, as part of permanent exhibitions in museums, as travelling exhibitions, as memorial parks, and many more.

The handling of human remains in museums is a complex and sensitive issue that raises important ethical and cultural questions. The dignity of human remains is a central concern in discussions about the display, storage and study of such remains in museums and other institutions. Ethical issues are crucial when considering human remains. This means that the ICOM Code of Ethics, the E.C.C.O. Professional Guidelines in Conservation-Restoration, recommendations on the conservation-restoration of cultural heritage, and the principles of ethical research should be strictly followed. Museums and cultural institutions are increasingly endeavouring to strike a balance between the preservation of human remains for research and educational purposes and respect for the dignity and cultural significance of these remains to the communities from which they originate. However, not all issues have been resolved. New ways of presenting museum artefacts and the demands of capital, such as in the cultural tourism industry, raise new ethical questions about how to preserve the dignity of the deceased.

When we talk about sensitive museum materials, it is necessary to keep in mind the right to personal dignity, which is not only the right of the person living here and now. Dignified treatment does not end with the death of a person but turns into a highly ethical attitude of the living towards the deceased. The integrity of personal dignity is not only a legal category but above all a civilizational norm.

The topic on human remains, their display and study has long been the subject of ethical and cultural debate. Over the years, several influential authors have shed light on this complex topic and contributed to our understanding of the historical, scientific, and ethical aspects involved. The literature on this topic is very extensive, and mostly deal with forensics, archaeology, anthropology, museums, ethics, law, general medicine, stomatology, human palaeontology and population genetics, human evolution, population migrations (for example: Podzorski 1990; Haglund et al. 1997; Buikstra et al. 2006; Dupras et al. 2006; Cassman et al. 2007; Jenkins 2010; Fossheim 2010; Giesen 2013; Stepputat 2014; O'Donnabhain et al. 2014; Dirkmaat 2015; Blau et al. 2016; Christensen et al. 2019; Squires et al. 2019; Batt 2022).

For Slovenia, in addition to specific archaeological research in which human remains were examined in detail forensically, (physically) anthropologically or in laboratories, other authors have also dealt with this topic, such as ethnologists (Bartulović and Podjed 2008; Podjed et al. 2012), on specific topics such as relics (Knez 2014; 2015; Ramšak 2019), first-war graves (Košir and Leben-Seljak 2019; Košir 2021; 2022a; 2022b; Hazler 2023), post-war mass graves (Ferenc 2022), and ethics (Ramšak 2014). Two publications on human remains should be highlighted, which were produced on the initiative of the Slovenian Museum Association (Kolar Osvald and Štrukelj 2017) and the Slovenian Archaeological Association (Leskovar 2023b).

Human remains: Definition and the types of human remains in museums and in historical places

Human remains are defined as bodies, and parts of bodies, of once living people from the species *Homo sapiens* (defined as individuals who fall within the range of anatomical forms known today and in the recent past). This includes osteological material (whole or part skeletons, individual bones or fragments of bone and teeth), soft tissue including organs and skin, embryos and slide preparations of human tissue. According to Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (2005) this definition does not include hair and nails, although it is acknowledged that some cultural communities do give these a sacred importance. Human remains also include any of the above that may have been modified in some way by human skill and/or may be physically bound-up with other non-human materials to form an artefact composed of several materials. Another, but much smaller, category of material included within this definition is that of artworks composed of human bodily fluids and soft tissue (Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums 2005, 9).

Following this definition and with regard to exhibitions and collections of human remains in Slovenia and elsewhere, we can categorise them into the following main groups: skeletons and skulls, mummies, ethnographic collections, anatomical specimens, relics, specific museum materials or collections, the famous corpses on display, commercial exhibitions, and, human composting.

Skeletons and skulls

Skeletons and skulls are perhaps the most common types of human remains found in museums. These exhibits serve as valuable tools for the study of human anatomy, evolution, and forensic science. The skeletons of ancient civilisations can shed light on their

physical characteristics, lifestyles and even causes of death. In addition, the study of skulls can provide valuable information about cranial features and help researchers understand the evolution and diversity of human populations.

An example of a skull collection is the collection of the Counts of Celje in the Regional Museum Celje where forensic, physical-anthropological, radiological, dental, anatomical and palaeopathological studies were carried out (Zupanič Slavec 2002).

A subgroup of the group of skeletons and skulls of human remains is the *ossuary*. It is a repository where human bones are stored. Throughout history, ossuaries have played an important role in various cultures. They were used to honour the dead, preserve their remains, and commemorate their lives. These unique structures offer valuable insights into the cultural practises, beliefs and customs of a bygone era.

The Ministry of Culture's register of immovable cultural heritage contains information on 22 ossuaries in Slovenia, which are: archaeological sites, ossuaries of the fallen of the 1st and 2nd World Wars, ossuaries of the fallen of the post-war massacres and other memorials and sites (Ministrstvo za kulturo 2024). So, the examples of different kinds of ossuaries in Slovenia are:

a) *Karners*. In Slovenia, there are four ossuaries, or so-called 'karners' (from the Latin *carnarium*), which contain bones from graves dug next to churches with burial rights (Libeliče in Carinthia, Gorenji Mokronog in Dolenjska, Jareninski dol near Pesnica in Slovenske gorice, and Križevci near Ljutomer). The bones were carefully removed from the ground, as they were not yet sufficiently decomposed, and stored in special chapels. Ossuaries were very popular 700 or 800 years ago, during the great epidemics. In the 17th century, the diocesan visitors considered them unnecessary and ordered the priests to demolish them.

b) *Cemeteries with ossuaries*, such as in Nevlje, Mekinje, Piran, Nova Cerkev near Vojnik, Šmihel near Novo mesto, archaeological site of St. Martin in Poljane above Škofja Loka.

c) *Remains of wars and conflicts* (killed soldiers, partisans, civilians). In some cases, museums exhibit human remains associated with wars and conflicts. These exhibits may include artefacts from mass graves, such as bones or personal belongings of the deceased. Although these exhibitions are very sensitive and emotional, they aim to remember and honour those who lost their lives during historical events and to promote remembrance and understanding of the consequences of war.

In Slovenia, there are several memorial sites with human remains from both World Wars, such as graves of prisoners of World War I (Košir 2022a) or military cemeteries (Košir 2022b). The hidden mass graves and their victims from the killing of enemies during the Second World War and in the post-war period were erased from public memory until 1990 (Ferenc 2022), but the legacy of the military cemeteries, chapels, monuments is well documented. The registers of both First World War monuments and memorials (Hazler 2023) as well as Second World War and post war mass killings and war cemeteries are documented (Register vojnih grobišč Republike Slovenije 2024; Evidenca prikritih vojnih grobišč 2024).

The register of immovable cultural heritage cites the following memorial sites: Italian ossuary in Kobarid (remains of Italian soldiers who fell in the First World War and were brought from the surrounding military cemeteries); Komna – the memorial to fallen Austro-Hungarian soldiers in the First World War on Na Kraju mountain; Tolmin – German ossuary for fallen German soldiers in the area of the Soča Front; Dražgoše – ossuary with a memorial to the victims of the Second World War); Novo mesto – grave of the fallen fighters and victims of the National Liberation War in Žabja vas; Žužemberk – the memo-

rial to the National Liberation War in Cvibljje; Bukovžlak – Teharje Memorial Park (central Slovenian memorial to the victims of the war – people executed after the war), Maribor – memorial to the victims of the post-war massacres and the ossuary on Dobrava.

Certain ossuaries are protected by special decrees in order to preserve the cultural, scenic, artistic, architectural, and historical significance of the monument. This preservation serves to emphasise the cultural monument and the event it represents while presenting its cultural value in its original location as well as in the media. In addition, these protection measures aim to promote education and scientific research. Any use of these ossuaries and any intervention in their vicinity must respect the preservation and maintenance of the protected monumental features and be carried out with the utmost respect.

Mummies

The second group of human remains often found in museums is *mummies*. These are preserved bodies or body parts of humans or animals that were ceremonially preserved by removing the internal organs, treating them with natron and resin, and wrapping them in bandages. The ancient Egyptians are particularly famous for their elaborate mummification practises, which aimed to preserve the deceased for the afterlife. There are a variety of explanations for the complicated process of mummification, including its various forms and the different substances used for the preservation of corpses. One of the earliest accounts of the Egyptian process of mummification comes from the Greek historian Herodotus in his description of ancient traditions in *The Histories* (c. 430 BC) (Herodotus 2013, 129–131).

In Slovenia there is only one Egyptian mummy, which is kept and displayed in the National Museum of Slovenia, and some remains of the mummy, which are kept in the Slovene Ethnographic

Museum (Kajfež, Pflaum and Pflaum 2014). A mummy, mummies' body parts and related objects were sent to Slovenian museums by 19th century diplomats, merchants and collectors.

The National Museum of Slovenia keeps the mummified body of a man, a priest named A-keswy-te, in a wooden coffin made of sycamore and tamarisk wood, in linen, with sizing, chalk, resins, plant fibres, and painted with watercolours with inorganic pigments. It was donated by the Austrian Governorate Councillor and Consul General in Alexandria, Egypt, Anton Lavrin (1789–1869) in 1846. The mummy was found near the Colossi of Memnon, two massive stone statues of the pharaoh Amenhotep III, which stand at the front of the ruined Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III (1391–1353 or 1388–1351 BC), the largest temple in the Theban necropolis in Egypt. The circumstances of how Lavrin acquired the mummy in Egypt are not clear, nor is the exact location where the mummy was found. It is assumed that it may have come from the necropolis of El-Assasif with the tombs of Theban nobles and priests from the time of A-keswy-te's life (Narodni muzej Slovenije 2024).

The coffin and mummy were conserved and restored in 2000–2002. In January 2017, the mummy was given a permanent place in the new exhibition space of the National Museum of Slovenia, which was modelled on the Egyptian burial chambers. The mummified priest A-keswy-te is complemented by the museum's entire Egyptian collection, which consists mainly of small clay sculptures. A-keswy-te is the only ancient Egyptian mummy with an anthropomorphic coffin in Slovenia.

Ethnographic collections

The third group of human remains are found in *ethnographic collections* and include human remains that originate from indigenous or marginalised communities. These collections may con-

tain whole bodies, body parts, or even ancestral remains. These remains often originate from colonial times or scientific expeditions, and their display is always a subject of debate. However, many argue that these exhibits help to shed light on the cultural practises, religious beliefs and historical experiences of these communities. They also provide an opportunity for these communities to reflect on their history and engage in discussions about cultural heritage.

An example of human remains from ethnographic collections is the South American 'Chancha', a scalp trophy with preserved hair, or the shrunken head of an Indian woman from Ecuador, which is kept in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (Škerlj 1954). The 'Chancha' was recently removed from the permanent exhibition 'Between Nature and Culture', although it was already on display in a remote part on non-European cultures.

The Slovene Ethnographic Museum also keeps two Tibetan skull bowls that are associated with tantric practises and beliefs (Motoh 2020).

Anatomical specimens

Anatomical specimens include various elements of the human body, including bones, organs, dissected body parts, foetal specimens showing various stages of growth, exceptional cases of congenital anomalies, models representing embryology, and histological specimens. These specimens can come from deceased individuals or surgical specimens. It should be noted that small amounts of tissue, bone fragments, or internal organs do not fulfil the criteria to be classified as anatomical specimens (Deceased Human Bodies and Anatomical Specimens 2018).

The display of anatomical specimens is a common practice in medical and anatomical museums. These exhibitions serve an educational purpose and provide students, researchers, and the gen-

eral public with a deeper understanding of human anatomy, diseases and criminal cases. Although these specimens do not always represent an entire human body, they provide invaluable insight into various organs, systems, and abnormalities.

In Slovenia, medical faculties usually keep small collections of anatomical remains for teaching purposes. The reason for this is the need to use deceased human bodies and anatomical specimens in biomedical education and research. However, the country does not have a museum or collections of anatomical specimens of scientific and historical importance.

Posthumous body donation for research purposes has been permitted in Slovenia albeit without special regulations. Individuals who wished to donate their bodies contacted the Institute of Anatomy at the Faculty of Medicine in Ljubljana. There, they were informed about the necessary procedures and given a form to fill out. It is important to note that the declaration could be nullified without giving reasons. Those who signed the declaration to donate their bodies to the Institute after their deaths had to be of legal age and capable of making such decisions. The Institute also informed the donor's relatives about the process. After the donor's death, the relatives contacted the Institute, which then arranged for transportation and used the remains for scientific and educational purposes. At the end of the process, the mortal remains were cremated and buried anonymously in the Žale Cemetery in Ljubljana, without speeches, floral decorations, or national symbols. However, if certain body parts were considered particularly interesting or valuable, they were not buried but kept at the Institute. For example, the Institute has been preserving interesting skeletons and preparations preserved in a phenol-formalin solution for a hundred years (Mihevc 2012). From 2015, the possibility of making cadavers available to the Institute of Anatomy for teaching and research purposes was discontinued, as it

was suspected that these bodies, or parts thereof were being resold for money without the knowledge and authorisation of the Faculty of Medicine (Ferlič Žgajnar 2015).

Relics

Relics are objects with great historical, cultural or religious significance. They are often associated with revered persons, such as saints or spiritual leaders. Relics are believed to have some kind of spiritual power or connection to the person they represent. Throughout history, relics have played a fundamental role in various faiths and societies, serving as symbols of worship, inspiration or even healing.

Relics are parts of the body of a deceased saint, such as bones, teeth, blood, preserved body parts (heart), ashes or possessions, such as clothing or objects that have come into contact with the saint (cross) and are kept as objects of veneration. Among the major religions, Christianity, almost exclusively Roman Catholicism, and Buddhism have emphasised the veneration of relics. In the Eastern Orthodox churches, veneration is centred on icons rather than relics. The attitude of the 16th century Protestant reformers towards relics was uniformly negative and the veneration of relics was not accepted in Protestantism. Like Christianity, Islam also has a cult of relics around its founders and saints (Augustyn 2023).

Relics can be categorised in different ways, including physical remains (bones, body parts), objects associated with the person or objects that were touched or used by the person during their lifetime. These objects evoke a sense of awe and reverence in the faithful, making them highly respected and coveted. The examples of relics are: true cross, rosary or other prayer beads, such as malas in Buddhism, holy water, crown of thorns, pyx, talisman, or other votary objects that is used as a talisman or charm because of their perceived spiritual energy, idol, and monstrance.

According to Knez (2014), Christianity distinguishes relics according to their importance. First class relics are bodily remains of Jesus Christ himself (e.g. the Holy Prepuce, Christ's fingernail, Holy Blood), objects closely connected to the events from the life of Jesus Christ (e.g. the Holy-Crib, the True cross, the Shroud of Turin) and the physical remains of saints, particularly martyrs (e.g. bones, hair, limbs). Second Class Relics are the personal items of a saint (e.g. a garment, shoes, a prayer book, a cross, prayer beads, tools used by a saint or devices a saint was tortured with). These are items a saint wore (e.g. a sock, shirt or a glove), owned or frequently used. Third Class Relics are items (in particular, pieces of cloth) which were in contact with a saint's body (or a saint's reliquary) after their death. These relics include all items which came in contact with a first- or second-class relic (Knez 2014, 11-13). In Slovenia, various types of relics can be found in some museums, monasteries and churches.

The concept of associating jewellery with mourning and remembrance is not a new invention. As early as the 1600s, pocket watches were occasionally used as memento mori and served as a symbolic reminder of our mortality. These watches would feature skulls and Latin inscriptions such as 'the hour of death is uncertain.' Over time, these symbolic reminders evolved into tangible objects that helped people memorialise a deceased loved one. The profound influence of Queen Victoria played an important role in this change. To commemorate the passing of her third child, Princess Alice, Queen Victoria owned three brooches. In addition, Prince Albert, her husband, had an agate and diamond pendant made in honour of Victoria's mother's death. These pieces of mourning jewellery often included a strand of the deceased's hair, as it was believed that this contained the essence of the deceased and possessed immortality (Jarry 2022).

In this context, it is not surprising that recently *memorial or cremation or ash diamonds* have become increasingly popular as they provide a unique and lasting way to remember deceased loved ones. These special diamonds are made by extracting carbon from the remains of the deceased, creating a personal and tangible link to their memory. The process of creating these memorial diamonds involves a sophisticated process in which the ashes of the deceased are transformed into ethically cultured diamonds (see more Calvão et al. 2021). By subjecting the carbon extracted from a loved one's ashes to extraordinary pressure and high temperatures, an imitation of the natural diamond formation process is achieved. This transformation gives the memorial diamond an active role in preserving the legacy of the deceased. Similar to traditional relics, memorial diamonds create a deep connection to the person they represent. They embody the true essence, spirit, and treasured memories of the deceased and allow loved ones to carry a part of them wherever they go. These diamonds serve as a physical manifestation of remembrance and provide comfort to those grieving the loss of a loved one. (Jarry 2022)

Relics are often highly valued for their spiritual significance. They serve as a connection to the divine or symbolise a sacred presence. While memorial diamonds may not exactly fit the definition of relics, or have religious significance in the traditional sense, they do have spiritual and emotional value for people who wish to maintain a deep personal connection and memorialise their loved ones in an extraordinary way. They are a way to honour and preserve the memories of loved ones by capturing them in a tangible and everlasting form. Whether we consider a memorial diamond a relic or not, the importance and impact it has on the grieving process should not be underestimated. In Slovenia, honouring loved ones after their death in the form of memorial diamonds is not yet established.

Specific museum materials or collections

Specific museum materials or collections refer to different fields from law, criminology, victimology, forensic medicine to ethics, human rights, art and museology. An example of such collection is in Slovenian Police Museum (Kolar Osvald and Štrukelj 2017, 15) with objects such as forensic medicine exhibits (body parts of killed people), photos taken directly during visits to crime scenes, photos of evidence, texts describing the motive, the way the crime was committed and the way the perpetrator was discovered, objects associated with criminal activity (axes, various daggers and tools, firearms, objects processed into dangerous weapons, various burglary tools, broken cash registers, various documents, counterfeit money, various types of drugs and drug paraphernalia, smuggling tools). Since 1998, the identity of perpetrators and victims of crime has been covered on the material on display (documents, photos, descriptions).

The famous corpses on display

The famous corpses on display are the preserved bodies of rulers such as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in Moscow, North Korea's Kim Jong-Il and his father Kim Il-Sung, Ho Chi Minh from Vietnam, Mao Zedong from China, Hugo Chávez from Venezuela, Ferdinand Marcos from Philippines (see: Body politics 2016). Slovenia does not have any of their presidents on display as in the cases mentioned above.

Commercial exhibitions

Commercial exhibitions or demonstrative corpse exhibitions are aimed in particular at a lay audience so that the exhibitions can contribute to a better understanding of the human body and its functions and to improving of knowledge of medical issues (Bin et al. 2016, 584). These exhibitions feature real human bodies or body parts that have undergone a preservation technique known as plastination.

Plastination, developed in 1978 by Dr Gunther von Hagens at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, is a method of effectively preserving biological tissue with a visibly intact surface and a long durability (Sargon and Tatar 2014, 13). Von Hagens experimented with various plastics to improve the quality of renal samples until he finally developed the technique that serves as the basis for exhibiting plastinated bodies on tour (Bin et al. 2016, 585). Plastination involves replacing the water and lipids in biological tissue with hardenable polymers. Anatomical specimens are preserved by impregnating them with these polymers, which then harden. Silicone, epoxy or polyester resins are the most commonly used polymers, as they preserve the anatomical preparations in a dry, odourless state and require minimal post-treatment. These plastinates are free from the harmful effects of formalin and are used as teaching aids in medicine and as artefacts in art museum collections (Sargon and Tatar 2014, 13). Plastination enables the long-term preservation of tissue, and all donors must give their written consent for body donation and its use in medical research (Riederer 2013). By replacing body fluids with polymers, plastination allows the specimens to be analysed and exhibited over a longer period of time.

The human remains on display in these exhibitions are carefully prepared and arranged to emphasise various anatomical structures and systems. Visitors can view the skeleton, muscles, circulatory system, and other body systems in a vivid and educational way. The exhibitions aim to provide a deeper understanding of human anatomy and physiology. It is important to note that the human remains used in these exhibitions have to be legally and ethically acquired. In addition, today the exhibitions adhere to strict guidelines and regulations to ensure the respectful and responsible handling of human remains.

However, commercial exhibitions such as the travelling exhibitions ‘Bodies Revealed’ and ‘Body Worlds’, which took place in Ljubljana at the Gospodarsko razstavišče in both 2012 and 2018–2019, also showed preserved human remains with an educational purpose and opened up several ethical dilemmas. The ‘Body Worlds’ exhibition, for example showed various plastinations that illustrated the harmful effects of smoking on the respiratory system and at the same time emphasised the seamless integration of artificial joints into the skeletal structure of knees and hips. In addition, the exhibition served as a reminder to visitors to make healthy choices and lifestyle changes to combat serious diseases such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

These particular exhibitions caused considerable controversy and ethical concerns at the time. The main point of contention centred around the question of the origin of the corpses. The organisers of the exhibition relied solely on the information provided by their Chinese partners and were unable to independently confirm that the bodies were not those of executed Chinese prisoners. Many anatomical societies and ethics committees worldwide have expressed their concern about these exhibitions. They have emphasised two important points: the uncertain origin of the cadavers and the lack of unanimous agreement on post-mortem cadaver donations. In addition, they have highlighted the risks associated with the commercialisation and commodification of death and its exploitation for entertainment purposes.

Human composting

Human composting is the type of burial rite in which human remains are treated so as to turn into soil or compost. This process usually involves covering the body with plant matter in a special chamber to create an environment in which the corpse is decom-

posed to base organic soil over a period of 60 to 90 days. Human composting as an alternative burial option was first developed in 2021 and became legal in 2023 in some of the U.S. states. It is not legal in Slovenia.

In summary, human remains in museums, historical sites or educational institutions, or for personal use as memorabilia, can include a wide range of artefacts, each serving different purposes. From skeletons and skulls for educational and scientific study to mummies and ethnographic collections for cultural and historical understanding of social customs, these artefacts offer a glimpse into our shared human history. Although the display of human remains can be a controversial topic, when done thoughtfully and respectfully, it can provide visitors with invaluable educational and cultural insights.

Ethical considerations

Museums are known for preserving and exhibiting artefacts from different cultures and eras. However, among the artefacts on display is often a rather controversial and thought-provoking category of objects: human remains. While some consider the display of human remains to be disrespectful or even unethical (some museums removed them from exhibitions), others believe that they fulfil an educational purpose.

There are several important ethical issues regarding human remains that deserve attention. One of these concerns is the preservation of the dignity of the deceased. This issue revolves around how we can ensure that human remains displayed in museums are treated with the utmost respect and dignity.

Another important ethical question concerns the social and cultural context in which the display of human remains takes place. It raises the question of how different cultures and com-

munities perceive the display of human remains and what influence this perception has on museum practises. It also looks at the attitudes of the local population towards historical sites with human remains.

Finally, there is the question of education and awareness. This ethical question explores how museums can use the display of human remains to educate the public and stimulate social dialogue about identity, history and ethical issues.

Several ethical questions arise when working with human remains. Among other things, the important question is whether there is a universal ethical framework for dealing with human remains or whether this concept is so broad that it is little more than a generalisation. To be truly ethical, curators and scientists must have a solid understanding of what the discipline of ethics entails.

Legal framework and museum self-regulation

The legal instruments clearly show that a distinction is made between the recently deceased, whose remains are covered by laws regulating medical practise, medical research, declaration of death, and burial, and the ancient human remains, which are reduced to cultural heritage, often by proxy for the remains resulting from the actions of the living – such as burial practises, memorialisation practises or ritual practises. The recently deceased are seen as subjects, the long deceased as objects (Stutz et al. 2023).

Legislation and self-regulatory documents mention human remains explicitly or implicitly in connection with the concept of human dignity and cultural heritage. In Slovenian legislation, human remains are not nobody's thing, *res nullius*.

In the legal sense, human rights are enshrined in the highest legal act of the state, the constitution. In 1789, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaimed the fundamental

rights of man. After the Second World War, human rights were not only regulated and protected by national constitutions but also by numerous international legal acts. The first important universal document, also known as the 'human constitution', was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10th December 1948. With its fundamental recognition of the inherent dignity of man as the source of all rights and its acknowledgement of the equal rights of all members of society, this declaration became the basis for many subsequent international and regional documents, including the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which was adopted by the members of the Council of Europe in Rome on 4th November 1950 (Kolar Osvald and Štrukelj 2017, 20).

Despite the fact that international legal acts, conventions and the Constitution do not speak directly about the protection of a person after death, and despite the fact that there are many open legal questions in this regard, the posthumous protection of a person derives from respect for human dignity. It is about protecting the rights of the living and at the same time upholding the personal values of the dead. On the one hand, it is about protecting the individual, who can only trust that the law will not allow them to become an empty thing or an object after death, and who can feel their full dignity, develop freely and make decisions during their lifetime. On the other hand, it is about protecting the relatives of the deceased and, not least, about protecting the general moral values on which society is based (ibid., 22).

The state, which through legislation is primarily responsible for the protection of human dignity and rights in various areas – prosecution of criminal offences (desecration of corpses and graves, insult to honour and good name...), in healthcare (in relation to the

removal of parts of the human body...), in funeral activities, etc. – and through the use of various institutes fulfils the obligation to protect human assets even after death (ibid.).

Human remains belong to the category of movable cultural heritage. In the Slovenian legal framework, works of art and specimens exhibited in museums are implicitly protected by the Cultural Heritage Protection Act (Uradni list Republike Slovenije 16/08, 123/08, 8/11 – ORZVKD39, 90/12, 111/13, 32/16, 21/18 – ZNOrg and 78/23 – ZUNPEOVE) as part of public collections. The specific definition of human remains or anatomical specimens is set out under code P20 in the fifth article of Rules on the Registry of Types of Heritage and Protection Guidelines (Uradni list Republike Slovenije 102/10) as ‘remains (parts) of the human body that museums keep in their collections as culturally sensitive material (human skeleton, mummy, urn contents, relic).’

Other laws that relate to and protect human remains are: War Grave Sites Act (Uradni list Republike Slovenije 65/03, 72/09 and 32/17), Concealed War Graves and Burial of Victims Act (Uradni list Republike Slovenije 55/15 and 92/21) and Rules on War Cemeteries Register (Uradni list Republike Slovenije 79/049), which regulates the content of the register, such as the identification of the war cemetery and the buried persons, the description of the location of the war cemetery, and the protective provisions for the protection of war cemeteries.

In Slovenia, the boundary between forensic and archaeological cases is not precisely defined. In the case of mass graves, it depends on the circumstances, but if the persons suspected of killing the people are still alive, then it is legal and not an archaeological case (Leben Seljak and Jamnik 2011, 410).

One self-regulatory document worth mentioning is the 2017 ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, which outlines the essential

guidelines for professional conduct and performance expected of museums and their staff. The Code explicitly refers to human remains on four occasions (ICOM International Council for Museums 2017).

Firstly, human remains are mentioned in the chapter on the acquiring of collections under the paragraph on culturally sensitive material (2.5). It states that collections of human remains and material of sacred significance should be acquired only if they can be housed securely and cared for respectfully. This must be accomplished in a manner consistent with professional standards and the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from which the objects originated, where these are known. Secondly, human remains are included in the chapter on the museum collecting and research under the paragraph on human remains and materials of sacred significance (3.7). This paragraph states that research on human remains and materials of sacred significance must be accomplished in a manner consistent with professional standards and consider the interests and beliefs of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated, where these are known. Thirdly, human remains are included in the chapter on display and exhibition under the paragraph exhibition of sensitive materials (4.3). It states that human remains and materials of sacred significance must be displayed in a manner consistent with professional standards and, where known, considering 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 peoples. In the same chapter there is also a paragraph on removal from public display (4.4) which states that requests for removal from public display of human remains or

material of sacred significance from the originating communities must be addressed expeditiously with respect and sensitivity. Requests for the return of such material should be addressed similarly. Museum policies should clearly define the process for responding to such requests (ibid.).

So far, Slovenia has not approached the Egyptian authorities regarding the return of the only mummy kept in the National Museum of Slovenia. But Egyptian archaeologist and former Minister of Antiquities, Dr Zahi Hawass, who is also known for his efforts to have Egypt's heritage returned to Egypt, assured a Slovenian journalist that he had no problems with the Ljubljana mummy and that it made sense to keep it in the museum for the education of children, provided it was presented appropriately (Zgonik 2023).

Conclusion

The overview of the main types of cultural heritage of human remains in Slovenia shows a broad understanding of this type of heritage and exemplary care from the point of view of human dignity, documentation, research, material preservation and respectful and ethical presentation. Despite the many ethical concerns associated with human remains, such as the use of non-intrusive conservation methods, preserving the dignity of the deceased and respecting their descendants by allowing the repatriation of human remains to their countries of origin, understanding and acknowledging the social and cultural context of these human remains, assessing the attitude of the local population, using educational platforms to facilitate dialogue and preventing the commercialisation and exploitation of these remains, there are no known cases where Slovenian institutions have violated any of these norms when handling human remains.

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