

***Anatomy Museum: Death and the Body Displayed.* Elizabeth Hallam. London: Reaktion Books, 2016. 444 pp.\***

Review by Patricia Galloway

This book traces the history of a single museum, the Anatomy Museum at Marischal College of the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, as a reflection of the evolution of anatomical practice and its pedagogy from the nineteenth century until 2009, including a prefatory introduction to the emergence of anatomy itself in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Elizabeth Hallam, as a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Anthropology in the University of Aberdeen, had unusual access to the museum as it existed before 2009: to its contents, to photographic records and sketches of how the museum had changed over time, and to teaching materials and anatomical “preparations” created by the anatomists—usually the professor who was museum director but relatively frequently other faculty members—and their writings and publications. The book is lavishly illustrated and beautifully produced, which is especially important because of its emphasis on the materiality of the story.

The introductory chapter opens with a statement of purpose:

This book is about human bodies: how they have been imagined, made visible and tangible in museums of anatomy and other related sites of display. It explores the collection and exhibition of bodies after death in historical and contemporary settings, asking how and why human remains have been acquired and preserved, and examining what these practices entail for the people involved in them. [7]

Hallam approaches the understanding of anatomical practice through the social connections that lay behind the museum’s operations, for the procurement of collections, their preservation over time, and the making of both objects for exhibit and the making of exhibits themselves. On the pedagogical side, she asserts that the practice of anatomy as engagement with the real tends to fix normality according to what is considered normal for the time when the student engages in dissection, since the active engagement with dead bodies is so vehemently situated in the present and is generally focused on current belief. She is particularly interested in the analysis of the training of sight and touch as practiced in the field of anatomy and indeed as continuously given significant attention in medical education, being used to achieve a three-dimensional knowledge of the body by an anatomy student through what might be called visualization training. The first chapter signals this interest with the title “Hand and Eye: Dynamics of Tactile Display.” Following the history of the Marischal Anatomy Museum allows the development of a portrait of the evolution of a pedagogy to achieve these ends.

Hallam provides in the second chapter a history of the emergence of the uses of dead bodies from saints’ relics’ veneration through the condemnation of criminals to both death and dissection. She outlines the use of early anatomy theatres for public witnessing as well as education, then points to the collecting of human and animal skeletons and body parts in early

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museums and the emergence of first the creation of extraordinarily detailed wax models and then as preservatives became available, the beginning of dissection-derived preparations. From well before Vesalius in the sixteenth century, detailed “atlases” (on the mapping model borrowed from exploration) of dissection-derived anatomical drawings were made to capture knowledge and pass it on.

The emergence of museums of “preparations” (a term for a completed and preserved dissection of a body part), models, and drawings as part of medical schools seems initially to have been dependent in Britain on the supply side of body procurement, since after the British Anatomy Act of 1832 to regulate the lawful acquisition of bodies for medical studies there was an increasing shortage of bodies for dissection. Further, the advancement of medicine particularly toward the middle of the twentieth century cut down dramatically on the time anatomy occupied in the medical school curriculum without lessening the need for an understanding of the whole of anatomy for diagnosis as well as surgery. Through the nineteenth century medical training had consisted largely in anatomy and training in the composition of medicines, followed by apprenticeship to a practicing physician; whereas through the twentieth century there became simply more and more to learn without much expansion, at least at first, in the time to be taken in learning it. Hence during the museum’s early days in the nineteenth century, it was something of a hodgepodge of skeletons—both human and animal, the latter for comparative anatomy; anthropological samples obtained from graduates and friends of the College serving in colonies of the British Empire; preparations made from actual dissections, and models from wax or papier-maché. All of these sources provided materials that could fill in when bodies for dissection were few and had to be shared out among groups of up to ten students per body.

Hallam traces the formation of the first anatomy museums as private collections and then as an adjunct to scientific knowledge. There were by the early nineteenth century prototype museums that the Marischal could take as a model, including the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh Anatomy Museum and the Hunterian collection at the Royal College of Surgeons in London. In 1800 Marischal College first began to collect oddities, to begin making anatomical preparations in imitation of the great Hunterian collection, and to collect atlases. Another aspect of Marischal museum growth was the acquisition of skeletons and bones. To obtain samples, the Marischal could draw on previous graduates now working as physicians in the British colonies (who provided skulls and bodies of “natives” as well as the skeletons of exotic animal species) and on access to locally available species like whales and exotic animals from menageries. During the period of 1869-1881 the museum was being provided with its own new space, and during that time the leading anatomist John Struthers, as curator, along with taxidermist George Sim and his assistant Robert Gibb, prepared multiple skeletons as well as using the “moist method” for preserving soft tissue structures.

Because of the attention to social connections in the book, the author pays attention not only to the curators of the museum—usually following how the leading anatomist at the medical school as curator experimented with available possibilities—but also to the support staff, which began to grow with the new building to include an attendant who cared for specimens, demonstrators who would demonstrate dissections that most students would not do, a porter to manage the bodies, and cleaners for the whole space. All of these people are named and shown photographically along with some of their work. As anatomy museums came of age in their

scientific turn during the 1890s to 1930s, the support staff became ever more important as the creation of moist soft-tissue preparations and the provision of custom containers crucial for their preservation became a new practice of specialist attendants. Later in the period shortages of bodies for dissections became even worse, but the most was made of this as students and professors added to the collections of the museum by making drawings of anomalies discovered during dissections. Photography and microscopes were integrated into teaching and stereoscope photos to enhance depth of structure were used for student preparation for dissection. Additional specimens continued to be provided from alumni abroad as they helped drive home the “primitiveness” of colonized people; Hallam is particularly helpful in including such evidence of this as there is in the Marischal’s history. Interestingly, from this time the standard anthropometric measurements developed to prove native inferiority were taken not only from foreign specimens, but from all the students, with the purpose of providing yet another set of specimens for access. This practice continued for many years, often including later notes on the outcomes of the students’ lives—and today providing an interesting body of data. In 1907 a new Anthropological Museum was created elsewhere on the campus, and relevant materials were moved out of the Anatomy Museum, making way for an Embryological Laboratory in the former space where such collections had been kept. In this time period as well, visiting the Museum was restricted to students and scientists, while the public was directed to the Anthropological Museum.

A thread of continuity among professor-curators was established as they were succeeded by their students: Struther was replaced by Robert William Reid, who was replaced by Alexander Low and Low was replaced by Robert Douglas Lockhart. A former naval surgeon, Lockhart made significant changes in the work of the Museum as he brought in a more modern approach to anatomy (the “new anatomy” of the 1940s) that recruited imagery—not only scientific photography but images reflecting normal life and especially movement from magazines, as well as new visualizations from x-rays. Dissection was also modernized, with new attention to cleanliness, better dissecting tables, and wearing of protective coats. There was attention to students’ awareness of their own bodies via an emphasis on surface anatomy, and teachers made their own teaching aids, including films. Lockhart’s 1942 *Anatomy of the Human Body* was image-intense and large-scale drawings were used mounted on a sort of “wall-book” like those used for the storage of paintings.

Models were increasingly used, especially for body parts that were small and hard to dissect (e.g. the head). All kinds were made, not only in wax but with multilayered papier-maché, plaster casts, and the use of modeling clay by students to mold muscles onto skeletons during study. Hallam points out that a significant change made as models evolved was the change from recumbent models often seen in wax to vertically-oriented models in plastic, which not only more suggested the living body but was probably a result of the limitations of the materials. The Marischal even acquired several knitted/sewn samples in which groups of structures were modeled through different textures and colors of the fabrics.

In the late 1960s, when David Sinclair took over as professor, the Museum was drastically reorganized in aid of the continued teaching of anatomy, even as the number of hours devoted to it were cut by almost half (690 in 1945, 356 in 1970). For the first time there was a complete up-to-date inventory made: all remaining anthropological materials including human remains not

needed for anatomical study were passed to the Anthropological Museum (where Lockhart served as curator) and most animal skeletons were sent to the Zoology Museum. The Museum was reorganized as a study venue, with tables for students to use and collections reordered into bays by anatomical regions, with a catalog for each bay that cross-referenced books and set students questions to ask themselves while studying, which mirrored the sequence of teaching and was widely imitated. Most preparations were given new plexiglass mounts to avoid the distortion of jars. In the 1930s-1940s the source of bodies for dissection shifted from unclaimed bodies to freely donated bodies, and this led to memorial services beginning in the 1950s, at which point dissected cadavers had their names and identities restored and were memorialized in a Book of Memory at the school and on a stone at the crematorium's Garden of Remembrance.

The transformation of the Marischal Anatomical Museum at Aberdeen University over time provides a careful picture of the behavioral economy of changes in ideas around anatomical dissection, as carried out by a variety of participants over time. One comes away with a much better idea of the practices and tensions that made anatomical dissection take the course it did in Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For anyone concerned with medical museums or puzzled by rows of jarred specimens in anatomy labs, it is well worth the read.

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