

A MOVEMENT OF THE SOUL

Embodied Encounters with Human Remains in the Phantom Museum

By: Gemma Angel



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In June 1929, Peter Johnston-Saint, an itinerant purchasing agent in the employ of Sir Henry Wellcome, finalised the sale of 300 preserved tattooed human skin fragments. The seller, a Parisian physician calling himself "Dr. Lavalette" - most likely a pseudonym - claimed to have collected and prepared these curious remains himself, and is recorded in Johnston-Saint's journals as having remarked that the skins came from the bodies of "sailors, soldiers, murderers and criminals of all nationalities." Now housed in the storage archives of the Science Museum in London, new research into this remarkable collection reveals a far more complex picture of their origins and afterlives.

In September 2009, I began doctoral research on the Wellcome¹ tattooed skin collection. Almost nothing was known of the history of these specimens, but for the brief notes in Johnston-Saint's journals; and though I had many questions, none were sufficiently formulated as to constitute a central research question around which I would frame my work. Thus my research did not begin with conventional scholarly objects such as theoretical questions, a period in history, or the work of an artist, but a collection of material things assembled in a museum archive. I soon found that these 'objects' were complex, fascinating and problematic materials to work with, imbued with a great many political and ethical entanglements. As human remains, they frequently provoke visceral and emotional responses from those who view them, investing them with a certain agency of

their own. From the outset, I found the tattoos to be compelling, irresistible, even; they are chimerical, hybrid, and loquacious. They are simultaneously human remains, icons, objects of medical and criminological interest, fragments of the lives of others, memories made flesh. Grappling with the nature of the collection and how to define the specimens was the first challenge that confronted me.

The museum context became my starting point, as the environment in which my work would take place. Blythe House, now home to collections belonging to the Victoria and Albert, Science and British Museums, was originally built as the headquarters of the Post Office Saving Bank between 1899 and 1903. The building consists of labyrinthine corridors and storerooms over four storeys, not including attics and sub-basements, where many of the larger examples of scientific equipment are kept. The vast majority of the Science Museum's collection - some 170,000 objects - are hidden away in Blythe House. Much of the building has been blacked out to preserve the objects in cool, dark rooms, which are home to everything from boxes of shrunken heads to early examples of iron lungs (one of which is hand-operated in case of power failure), from eerie and ingenious prosthetic limbs of all types to an exhaustive collection of over 700 pair of forceps and freeze-dried genetically modified animals. Blythe House is a dark and atmospheric space crammed with thousands of weird and wonderful things, many of which have never been on public display - including the tat-

tooed skins.

When I first arrived at the storage archives, I spent two weeks undergoing a formal induction into the museum, learning its protocols and storage systems, fulfilling security checks and passing object handling training, before I could begin work on the tattoos. I was introduced to the conservation staff and given a curator's pass. Once I had completed my initiation into the museum, I was allowed to enter the storage archives freely. On arrival I sign the staff log at security, where I am then given a pass and keys to the human remains room. The pass admits me through a turnstile and a further three alarmed doors before I reach the part of the building where the tattooed skins are stored. Thus my work at the museum archive involves key passes, log books, trolleys, storage rooms with distinctive smells, cool echoing corridors, as well as conversations with conservationists, curators and security staff. It involves fume hoods and latex gloves, computers, cameras and measuring tools. I rely upon my senses to analyse each tattooed skin closely: I look, I touch, I can smell them - I am attentive to what their materiality may tell me of their origins and history. Who they were, when their tattoos were made, how they were preserved. Each one is a fragment of an individual life that I am trying to reveal. More than merely objects, the tattooed skins retain the presence of the people they once were, the *subjects* who had this or that tattoo design etched into their flesh, flesh that would ultimately outlive them. But there is another ghost: the

collector's presence is also palpable, selecting tattoos from an already complete corpus, making incisions, pinning out the fresh skin to be dried, assembling a new collection according to their own design. I am in a kind of 'dialogue' with the skins, bringing my own experience and knowledge to bear on them, to make them yield up information in return. But what can they tell me through this essentially sensory, ethnographic way of knowing? Many things, which I take care to write down.

Sensory methods and embodied knowledge

Encountering my research subjects first hand, unwrapping fragment after fragment of dried skin and analysing them closely beneath the constant whirl and rush of the portable fume hood² in the lab, I make note of the appearance, texture, pliability and smell of each skin, producing pages and pages of notes. In many ways, this process it is not entirely unlike anthropology with living people; I am very aware that I am not just dealing with pieces of people's lives, but pieces of people, who lived a life. Each time I draw another fragment from an airtight container, something unanticipated strikes me about this or that skin, in a similar way in which a conversation may take unpredictable turns and tangents once a dialogue is struck up. And just as the interlocutors engaged in any given conversation are not merely interchangeable, with each new meeting constituting a unique interaction, so too each new

encounter with the tattooed skin fragments presents unexpected responses and reflections. A new series of questions form in response to each one, and the tattooed skins themselves begin to suggest possible answers as I explore them.

Sometimes these questions primarily concern the tattooed individual. For instance, on unwrapping a small specimen, little larger than the palm of my hand, I am confronted with a large tattooed eye, staring out from a tough and rather hairy fragment of skin. An eye - a protection symbol perhaps, to ward off the evil eye? The eye stares back at me unblinkingly. The next specimen I take out of the box is

almost identical, so much so that it quickly becomes apparent that these two eyes are a pair, disconnected from one another in death but once part of the same body. The eyes are of identical size and share strong stylistic similarity - certainly they were executed by the same hand. But it is the eyebrows that really give them away as a pair (Figure 1). A left eye, and a right eye. I recall an old photograph taken of a pair of tattoos on a twentieth century sailor's buttocks: two large eyes, staring straight ahead, beneath the tattooed phrase: I see you. Suddenly, the person whose skin I hold in my hands becomes three dimensional once more, a fleshy whole - not two little scraps of



Fig. 1 -Science Museum Objects no.s A747 & A754

dried skin indelibly marked with crude doodles, but part of a body with geography, specificity - and a sense of humour. I chuckle at his joke. Straight-forward observation of tattoo iconography can thus begin to reconstruct a sense of the person, reanimating the gestalt body, and reinstating the fragment back into the (albeit ultimately unknowable) context of a life once lived. Visual apprehension alone may restore three-dimensionality to the fragmented and flattened-out body. But perception is never experienced as a singular sensory modality; rather, it is always an inter-sensorial affair. Other senses may offer different revelations.

Texture, encountered both visually and through touch, provokes an entirely different response to that of the tattooed image, which is primarily perceived visually. The skin itself may be tough and bark-like, unyielding and stiff; or soft and leathery, with an internal surface marked by surgical tools, or the intricately pitted trace of deeper body tissues that can be seen in Figure 2. The impression of adipose cells, which remain in the connective tissue (or fascia) also reminds us that this specimen was once a part of a body with architecture, depth

and interiority. Each skin reveals differences in excision technique, preservation methods and presentational aesthetics. They are simultaneously natural substance and created artifice, a peculiar coagulation of organic matter and chemical agents that can freeze the impression of a living, feeling moment of somatic experience in time forever.

One such specimen I examine is covered in a multitude of tiny bumps, each one with a visible hair follicle, and I recognise the textural traces of horror or cold over the hardened skin surface. Permanently preserved gooseflesh (Figure 3). More than any other specimen, this one appears as a frozen moment in time, a record of the death of the subject, which also vividly conjures up the presence of the anatomist or pathologist who cut away the skin and preserved it

Fig. 2 - Science Museum Object no. A666



whilst the body was still in rigor. Whether or not the deceased felt cold or a creeping horror at the moment of death is impossible to know. The frozen texture of this skin, which I viscerally associate with both fear and cold, is caused by rigor mortis in the tiny arrector pili muscles of the skin, perhaps nothing more than a natural part of the early stages of decomposition. All this texture can reveal is that the skin was removed and preserved quickly, soon after death. Yet the death of the subject and presence of the collector impress themselves upon me insistently, such that my own affective response appears to mirror that of the deceased; I shiver, my skin prickles, as though in the presence of a ghost.

On other occasions, my most immediate questions concern the collector.³ I am often struck by the

apparently deliberate aesthetic choices made by the anatomist or physician who excised and prepared the skin. The small tattooed specimen shown in Figure 4 has been neatly trimmed to remove the frilled and punctured edges which inevitably occur as part of the drying process, turning this small scrap of skin into a fragile parchment page. The phrase *Je jure d'amour Henri Faure Jusqu'a la mort* (I promise to love Henri Faure until death) is transformed into a brief love note that may be carried in a pocket or wallet. The ever-present death of the subject only renders their tattooed sentiments all the more poignant. Was the collector aware of this? Did some sense of reverence lie behind the obvious care they took with the preservation? Could this tattoo have had some personal resonance for them, too? Could they have been inspired by the romantic notion that love

conquers death, rescuing these indelibly inscribed words from the grave as though to challenge the tattooed sentiment itself? Of course, these reflections are inherently speculative; but what they reveal is the presence of not one, but two subjects in dialogue with one another - a dialogue distorted by the power relations that exist between them. They 'talk'

Fig. 3 - Science Museum Object no. A576



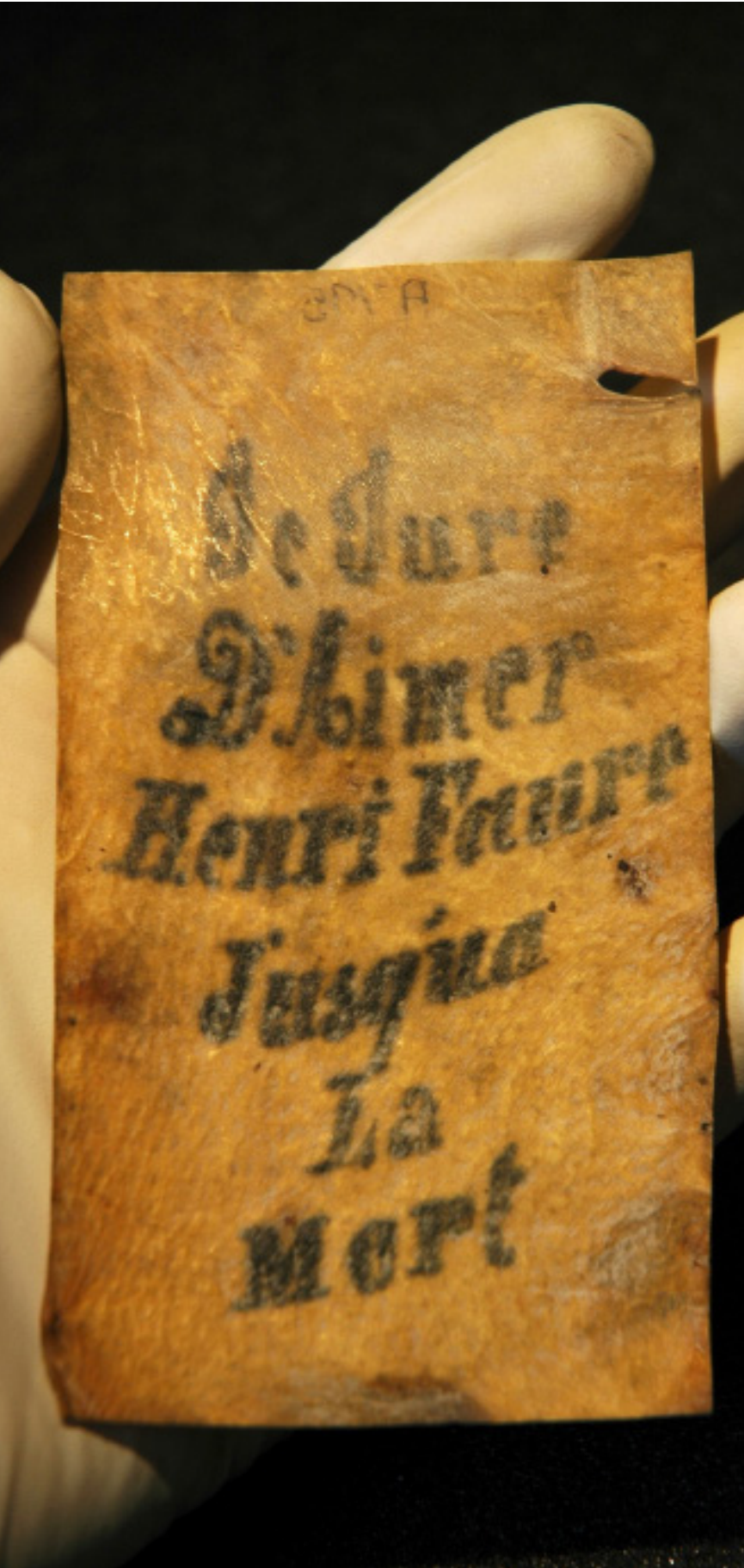


Fig. 4 - Science Museum Object no.A795

past one another, whilst I attempt to eavesdrop.

Many tattooed phrases in the collection speak of sentiments that evoke melancholy or sadness - especially those which were inscribed to commemorate the death of a loved one. The tattooed skin specimen shown in Figure 5 is typical of such memorial tattoos, with its image of a gravestone and weeping willow, above which the tattooed words read *Pense a moi* (Think of me). The boney figure of a grim reaper standing beside the grave, scythe in one hand and hourglass in the other, seems to transform this relic into a tattooed *memento mori*, and I wonder for whom the words "think of me" speak. The poignancy of this phrase is striking; I will never know who these words belonged to, or to whom they were addressed, just as he cannot have imagined that I would be reading them a hundred years after his death. But I do think of him, nevertheless.

"Things that talk" and the ghosts of subjectivity

Thing that talk are often chimeras, composites of different species. The difference in species must be stressed: the composites in question don't just weld together different elements of the same kind [. . .] they straddle boundaries between kinds. Art and nature, persons and things, objective and subjective are somehow brought together in these things, and the fusions result in considerable blurring of outlines.⁴

Ink and skin, human remains and preserved

specimen, museum object and trace of subjective memory: all of these descriptions cohere around and within the Wellcome tattooed skins. One could hardly imagine a better example of the kind of 'chimerical thing' of which Daston writes. But if they speak, what do they say? Answering this question is far from straightforward.

Writing in 1886, pioneering criminologist *Alexandre Lacassagne* memorably described tattoos as "speaking scars."⁵ Lacassagne was the most prominent theorist working on tattoos in France during the late nineteenth century, carrying out extensive research on prisoner tattoos. In his attempt to decipher their 'obscure criminal code', he frequently likened the body markings of prison inmates to hieroglyphs, graffiti and other forms of ideographic writing, reflecting a commonly held belief that the



Fig. 5 - Science Museum Object no. A78689

surface of the body could be 'read' for latent signs of deviance. But whilst the tattoo was certainly an irresistible research object, seeming almost to invite interpretation, their meanings remained opaque and fugitive. All too often, tattoos prove to be polysemous, ambiguous, and mutable. Once removed from the context of the body and life that gave them meaning, this tendency towards equivocality is intensified. The preserved tattoo is imbued with multiple presences: the tattooed and the numerous relations depicted in their tattoos; the tattooist; the anatomist or pathologist who removed them postmortem; not to mention any number of unknown collectors. Their very loquaciousness threatens to render them mute in a cacophony of voices and potential narratives.

I am not the first to encounter these tattoos as talkative, or to conjure narrative interpretations of



Fig. 6 - Science Museum Object no.A680

their possible pasts. Amongst Hari Kunzru's imagined biographies of various artefacts stored at Blythe House is object number A680 (Figure 6), one of the fragments of tattooed skin that I study. In his tale, Kunzru's narrator is a young woman involved with a violent and unpredictable man named Jules, with whom she is in love. She has his image - a portrait - tattooed on her body in a moment of devotion, but later, when he beats her, she fights back, fatally wounding him with a knife:

Murderess. My description in the newspaper. A passionate woman. I liked that part. I didn't like the Italian professor. He was a cold fish. He waited for me in the superintendent's office and the warders took me up to him. He was doing research, he said, in his pompous Italian voice. Research into the nature of the criminal mind. So he measured my head and then had me undress and show him Jules's picture. As I stood there half-naked he wrote things down and looked at me, a hooded look which on the surface was supposed to mean he thought I was nothing, and underneath meant the opposite. As they took me back out he was already whispering to the superintendent, making his arrangements, his request.⁶

The 'Italian professor' in Kunzru's story is undoubtedly Cesar Lombroso, who became famous in the late nineteenth century for his work on criminality and tattooing. Whilst it is unlikely that Lombroso had any involvement with the Wellcome tattoos, there is at least one surviving example of preserved tattooed human skin in the collection he assembled

for his *Archivio di Psichiatria, antropologia criminale e scienze penali* in 1880, which later became the Museum of Psychiatry and Criminology at the University of Turin.⁷ There is also some truth in the tale in that criminologists were amongst those fascinated by the tattoo during the late nineteenth century, and a great deal of work was carried out on the tattoos of prisoners. *Alexandre Lacassagne* collected hundreds of photographs as well as almost two thousand drawings of prisoner tattoos. In the *Archives de l'anthropologie criminelle* a collection of a similar number of preserved tattoos is mentioned in an account of Lacassagne's extensive forensic teaching collection, held at the laboratory of Legal Medicine in Lyon.⁸ Many of his photographs and tracings have been dispersed, or lost - what became of his collection of tattooed skins is unknown. Little remains amongst the manuscripts and notes stored at the fonds Alexandre Lacassagne in Lyon today. That tattoos were equated with deviancy and degeneration by Lacassagne and his colleagues was certainly the case. But few of the tattoos in the Wellcome collection can be traced back to specific individuals, criminal or otherwise, or to specific criminologists engaged in collecting human skin. The identities of the tattoo collectors remain as obscure as those from whom the tattoos were collected.

Piecing together the histories of these remains inevitably involves acts of imagination, as well as careful material analysis and historiography. The material substance of the collection - human skin

and tattooed ink - suggest possibilities that I am compelled to explore. A multisensory, tactile approach encourages contemplation of their affective presence, of associations between skin, touch, sensation, pain and memory. As bodily fragments, they remain fundamentally incomplete, mere parts. The reconstruction of their histories necessarily reflects this; active processes of remembering and forgetting are at work in sensory/emotive interactions with them, yet it is the forgotten that is foregrounded. The tattoo is a memory made flesh, the indelible presence of a once-living consciousness - a reminder, paradoxically, of that which is absent and unknowable. Who was this person who felt the pain of the tattoo needle, who inscribed these images, who cherished or regretted this memory? The museum archives are full of such ghosts; the basement room containing prosthetic limbs, for instance, seems to be populated with people:

In the storerooms of the museum, stacked on shelves and arranged side by side like dolls laid to rest in a nursery, are parts of people. Brass legs laced up along the thigh, spidery steel-jointed arms, wooden hands wrapped in leather: not flesh or blood, but human remains nonetheless, remnants of their long-dead owners, clues to unknowable lives.⁹

Like the tattooed skin fragments, these prostheses seem, somehow, to still be inhabited by those lives; in the pungent corporeal smell which clings to them;

in the particular wear pattern in the leather heel of a glove, or in the odd modifications made by their wearers. It is as though a reversal has taken place - these artificial appendages once created to replace lost limbs seem now to be haunted by the phantoms that once animated them, dislocated from the bodies of their deceased hosts. Phantom limbs are not just felt manifestations of something that no longer physically exists, a kind of 'sensory ghost', but like ghosts of the dead, are produced in response to a traumatic loss.¹⁰ As Gonzales-Crussi so eloquently writes:

It is like a movement of the soul, a trepidation so powerful that it pries open the hermetic door of time and rescues a frozen segment of life that is neither past nor present; a magic act of the body so portentous that it resuscitates a dead and decomposing limb, or reconstitutes it from burnt ashes, guides it across the gulf of time, and reimplants it on the parent trunk, in order to defy catastrophic adversity with the simple affirmation that it says, 'I am alive'.

The tattooed skins of the Wellcome collection are fragments which similarly defy death. The sentiments of their bearers live on, provoking a range of corporeal responses in the living; laughter, revulsion, melancholy. Their material substance compels recognition of their *subjectness*, endowing them with a presence that is haunting in its ambiguity. The phantoms that inhabit these scraps of skin graft

themselves onto the living with an insistence as if to say “Pense a moi”.¹¹

Biography

Gemma Angel is an interdisciplinary scholar specializing in the history of the European tattoo and tattoo preservation practices. She gained her BA in Fine Art from the University of Leeds in 2004, before going on to study for her MA degree in Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester. She has also previously trained as a tattooist. Gemma is currently completing her doctoral thesis on the Wellcome tattoo collection at University College London and the Science Museum. More information on her work can be found on her research blog: www.lifeand6months.com.

Footnotes

1. Hildi and Danielle Hawkins Olsen (eds) *The Phantom Museum and Henry Wellcome’s Collection of Medical Curiosities*, Profile Books: London, (2003). The Phantom Museum explores a broad range of stored at Blythe House archives through imaginary narrative, including one of the Wellcome collection tattooed skins, and is a reference point in this article for own my reflections on working in this environment.
2. The fume hood is a kind of portable extractor fan, which is necessary whenever I am handling the tattoos. The skins are thought to contain traces of toxic chemical substances used in the dry-preservation

process - most likely mercuric sulphide or arsenic trioxide.

3. For more on the collectors and collecting of tattoos, see Gemma Angel, ‘The Tattoo Collectors: Inscribing Criminality in Late Nineteenth Century France’, in *Bildwelten des Wissens*, Band 9.1, (2012): pp.29-38. Available online: <http://lifeand6months.com/publications/>
4. Lorraine Daston, *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, Zone: New York (2004): p.21.
5. Alexandre Lacassagne and Emile Magitot, ‘Tatouage’, in A. Dechambre and L. Lereboulet (eds): *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, 3rd ser., 16, (Paris: 1886): p.140.
6. Hari Kunzru, ‘The Collected’ in *The Phantom Museum*, (2003): p.70.
7. Susan Regener, ‘Criminological Museums and the Visualization of Evil’ in *Crime, Histoire & Societes / Crime, History & Societies*, Vol. 7, No.1 (2003): p.3. Available online at: <http://chs.revues.org/index604.html>
8. Anon. “Les Musée du laboratoire de médecine légale à Lyon”, in *Archives de l’anthropologie criminelle*, (Lyon: 1890): p.366.
9. Gaby Wood, ‘Phantom Limbs or The Case of Captain Aubert and the Bengal Tiger’ in *The Phantom Museum*, (2003): p.79.
- Ibid, p.85.
10. F. Gonzalez-Crussi, *The Five Senses*, Picador: London (1990) p.11.