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Curious Skin

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In 1929, one of Henry Wellcome's itinerant purchasing agents, Peter Johnston-Saint, purchased 300 preserved tattooed human skins from one Dr. "La Valette", the "old osteologist" at Rue Ecole de Medecine, Paris.

Eighty years later, I find myself in the fortunate if somewhat challenging position of researching this collection, which has spent most of its quiet history in storage at the Science Museum London. Challenging it is; not only because the total sum of archival records pertaining to these intriguing objects are described in my opening sentence above, but also because of the unique and contentious issues inevitably confronted when working with collections of human remains.

One of the key questions that I want to answer is of course who was Dr. La Valette, and why did he have in his possession 300 dry-prepared specimens of tattooed human skin? How did he acquire them? And why, in the 1920's, did he decide it was time to be rid of them? Tattoos were of great interest to European criminologists during the late 19th century, and were the source of much debate in medico-legal circles; many scholars believed that the presence of tattooing in European culture represented worrying signs of atavism, criminal proclivity, or dangerous 'degeneration' within their populations.

No doubt my research will lead me to Paris in search of the elusive "La Valette" soon enough; but for now, much of my current work is focused on the skins themselves. My work in the NMSI archives involves a great deal of painstaking visual and material analysis of the objects. As I endeavour to learn something of their past lives I am reminded of the pithy characterisation of tattoos as "speaking scars"- the oft quoted phrase of Alexandre Lacassagne, a prominent late 19th century forensic scientist who took particular interest in tattoos. What did they 'say' to him and his contemporaries, and why was this obscure visual code of such fascination that the very skins themselves were harvested, as though their message were all the more significant encoded in flesh? Why not simply take a photograph?

The tattoo itself occupies an intriguing boundary, both physiologically and socio-culturally; it appears at the body surface, but is suspended indelibly *within* the flesh. Tattoos seem to present a legible message to the outside world, promising to reveal the depths of the tattooed other; yet our attempts to decipher this message uncover innumerable interpretations, which often lead us only into further mystification. Without the context of a life, a personal history, what can these marks really tell us about their bearers?

As museum collection objects they are extremely curious; varying from delicate artifacts prepared with surgical intent to rather grotesque scraps of knarly flesh, which appear to have been hacked from the cadaver, not always preserving the tattoo intact. Most of the tattoos are the work of amateurs, their style clear to the naked eye as a

string of loosely grouped dots - an easy mistake to make if the tattooist does not know to stretch the skin adequately. Most too, are applied with simple hand-made needles.

There are a few examples of early machine-produced work. Nearly all are black, with occasional flashes of red. Some of the designs possess a simple eloquence, expressed in phrases such as “*Child of Misfortune*” and “*I swear to love Henri Faure until death*”. Others, like the tattoo of an apparent auto-abortion, (<http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/objects/display.aspx?id=92069&keywords=tattoos>) are disordered, difficult-to-decipher images whose dark subject matter eludes comprehension.

If these objects could speak, what would they tell me? They are fragments of the lives of others, memories made flesh, markers of identity, objects of medical interest and museum artifacts. Uncovering their secrets will be my greatest challenge.

Gemma Angel is a current AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award holder with UCL History of Art Department and the Science Museum London. Further details of her PhD research project can be found at www.ucl.academia.edu/GemmaAngel