

Book Review

Elizabeth Hallam, *Anatomy Museum: Death and the Body Displayed*, London: Reaktion Books, 2016, hardback £35.00, pp. viii+444

Margaret Werry,

Anatomy Museum is a book about the social life of the dead. In museums of anatomy and pathology, Elizabeth Hallam argues, the dead and the living interact in the pursuit of knowledge. This richly detailed, generously illustrated volume pursues this argument through an analysis of a single museum, the Anatomy Museum of Marischal College in Aberdeen, which it uses as a prism to examine changing practices of collection, categorization, display, anatomical education, memorialization, and fabrication in the West from the middle ages to the present. This is an ambitious project, doubly so given Hallam's commitment to new materialist understandings of the inherent 'openness' of objects. She is interested in the dynamic processes through which objects – here, human remains – are continually made and remade: the assemblages with which they are entangled, and the networks through which they are transacted and transformed over time.

These assemblages and networks encompass disciplinary formations (of professionalized medicine, anatomy, anthropology and zoology); institutions (museums, but also zoos, hospitals, universities, shops, circuses, welfare policy, and the domain of popular culture); practices (of dissection, preservation, visualization, and intextuation); geographies (from the architectural layout of the Marischal itself, to its diaspora of alumni throughout the British empire); relational networks (the divisions of labour and professional hierarchies between those who work in, for, or beyond the anatomy museum, or between donors, staff, donor kin, and the community at large); and other forms of matter (the media of wax, plaster, plastic, text, photograph, or X-ray through which human remains are transformed into legible exhibits). This interest in networks makes the book as much an enterprise of cartography as one of historical narrative. This is quite literally the case in Hallam's opening chapter, which follows the passage of a cadaver through the interlocking spaces of the Marischal, from storeroom and workshop, to dissection room, anatomy museum, and lecture theatre. In the process she illuminates the techniques of anatomical imagination and craft that enable students and patrons to visualize the interior of the whole body in motion from its static, fragmented remains.

The transformations that the anatomy museum impels, Hallam argues, are material *and* ontological, social *and* emotional. Human remains may be especially 'difficult' entities, freighted with cultural danger and sanctity, but they are neither inert nor isolate. In the anatomical museum, Hallam observes, distinctions between the organic and artefactual, real and representational, are moot, and the work of transformation (of body into cadaver, of cadaver into specimens, of specimens into exhibits, exhibits into professional expertise, and so on) draws the living and the dead closer. For anatomists, sensory, physical, and tactile *interaction* with the dead (as opposed to purely visual observation) is the ground of knowledge production. This core value (Hallam argues) crucially informs the anatomy museum's aesthetics and pedagogy, which oscillate between empathy with and objectification of the deceased/exhibit, often figuring the dead as living, and integrating attention to 'living anatomy' (in the bodies of students, for example) with the study of the cadaver.

With this compelling insight at its core, *Anatomy Museum* is organized in a largely chronological fashion. Hallam's introduction places the operations of anatomy museums in the

context of other processes of ritualization, memorialization, display and knowledge production involving human remains, from ossuaries and saint's relics to work by contemporary visual artists. The chapter mapping the Marischal follows, and then a sequence of chapters tracing the history of anatomical display. In chapter two, she examines the immediate predecessors to anatomy museums from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century: *memento mori* aesthetics, the performance of public dissection in anatomy theatres, cabinets of curiosity, and the development of new technologies of preservation and modeling, all of which enlivened remains, staging the relationships of the living with the dead. Her third chapter addresses the emergence of professionalized medicine, which consolidated private collections into public institutions, which in turn became the 'nerve centres' of imperial networks of doctors, scholars, civil servants, and soldiers, exchanging bodies, objects, information, and personnel. Where these early institutions grouped together exhibits pertaining to natural history, zoology, botany, and human anatomy, placing anatomical preparations alongside curiosities, Hallam's fourth chapter focuses on the successive reorganizations of the Marischal collections in the mid-nineteenth century. As disciplinary schemas evolved, anatomy museums sought to consolidate institutional authority through imposing codes of professional conduct and objective method that privileged in-person, tactile encounter with the cadaver. This chapter also maps the broad labour networks that sustained collection, preservation, and display, from taxidermists, zoo-keepers, and farmers, embalmers, porters and cleaners, and performers from menageries, traveling circuses and ethnological shows. A fifth chapter examines how methods of photography, drawing, diagramming, and X-ray transformed anatomical instruction, expanding the reach of anatomical collections in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even as many institutions closed their doors to the public. Hallam's sixth chapter covers the mid-twentieth century, and details the rise of an 'anatomical poetics' that critiqued 'dry bones' pedagogy and aimed (without eschewing the role of the cadaver) to imaginatively enliven anatomy through a focus on 'living processes' and appeals to popular culture, film and photography.

Taking a broader historical ambit, chapter seven examines museum instruction and exhibition through two centuries of model making and text-book illustration, meticulously tracking the use of different materials (wax, paper, and plastic) to illuminate anatomical interiors. The concluding chapter details ground-shifts in anatomical collecting from the 1960s as donation became the dominant source of human material, and medical schools and museums introduced memorial practices to acknowledge the ties of their specimens to kin and community. With the increasing specialization of the medical profession, display techniques were introduced to render the body penetrable and visible in microscopic detail, and collections were cataloged and re-purposed, finally severing anatomical from zoological, anthropological, and 'historical' material.

As this survey suggests, *Anatomy Museum* is a wide-ranging volume. Despite recent important contributions (by, for instance, Samuel Alberti), the comparatively scant literature on medical museums consists largely of conventional (often celebratory) historical studies of single institutions, and critiques of contemporary exhibitions. Hallam's study, by contrast, offers historical and sociological scope, theoretical precision, and an anthropological attention to terminology, geopolitics, disciplinarity, and institutional processes, while remaining attuned to the intimacies, logics, and poetics of practice. While it sometimes sacrifices narrative drive to detail and schematics, it is nonetheless a welcome and necessary addition to this literature, and should be foundational to future work.

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