

Policy on the Curation of Human Remains at the San Diego Museum of Man

FAQ

1. What are human remains?

Human remains are the remains of a person's body. These can exist separate from, or attached to, other items. For the purpose of this policy, the term does not include remains or portions of remains that may reasonably be determined to have been freely given or naturally shed by the individual, such as hair made into ropes or nets.

The term "human remains" is used interchangeably throughout this document with the terms "ancestor remains" and "people's remains."

2. Why does the Museum have human remains in its collection?

For decades, the practice of collecting dead people from burial sites for the purpose of study, education, research, and display was a common one. Museum staff or contracted archaeologists collected human bones or other remains for the Museum for much of the 20th century. The Museum also accepted donations of human remains from medical schools after they had finished using them for the instruction of medical students.

3. How many sets of human remains does the Museum hold and how did they get here?

SDMoM holds approximately 16,000 items that qualify as human remains, likely representing between 5,000 to 8,000 individuals. Remains from a single individual might be just one bone or a bone fragment, a complete skeleton, or anything in between.

Four collections account for the majority of human remains at SDMoM (approximately 14,000 of the bones and fragments):

Archaeological collections:

- The Hrdlička Paleopathology Collection (collected in 1913-15 for the Panama-California Exposition) includes approximately 1,600 bones from about 1,500 ancestors, primarily from Peru and Alaska, whose bones show evidence of disease, trauma, and cranial surgery.
- Field collections from sites in San Diego County, Baja California, Arizona and Nevada include the remains of approximately 500 Native American ancestors. Malcolm J. Rogers, the Museum's curator of archaeology from 1930-1945 completed the first systematic study of prehistoric cultures of the Southern California Coast. Rogers and other archaeologists excavated hundreds of human remains in an endeavor to understand Southern California history and the peopling of the Americas.

Medical collections:

- The Stanford-Meyer Osteopathology Collection (a donation from Anatomy Department of Stanford University in 1981) consists of approximately 3,500 human bones, also showing evidence of disease, from about 1,500 individuals whose cadavers were used by Stanford Medical School students.
- The Boring Collection (a donation from Professor Eugene Boring of Chaffey College in 2004-5) consists of over 9,000 bones from an unknown number of people from Calcutta, India. This collection was assembled by Dr. Boring in the 1950s and 1960s when India was exporting skeletal remains for use in U.S. medical schools.

In addition to the collections above, SDMoM holds the remains of 100 ancestors excavated or collected from various gravesites around the world, including Egypt, Vietnam, Vanuatu and Colombia.

4. Why is a policy on curating human remains necessary?

A new policy on curating human remains is necessary because the fields of professional archaeology, anthropology, and museum practice have changed as a result of advocacy over the past few decades by Indigenous and Native populations for sovereignty and the right to control their biological (ancestral remains), material (items created by their ancestors), and intangible (language and other sound recordings) heritage.

We believe that all institutions that hold ancestor remains have a responsibility to curate them according to best ethical standards, and in line with their institutional goals and policies. This policy on curating human remains, using the standard of informed consent, is our understanding of best practice, and meets our goals for holding respect and love for all humanity at our core.

For many decades, Museum policies related to the curation of people's remains prioritized research access and scientific discovery. Much of value to Western medicine, and to our understanding of human evolution and history, was learned by scientists, archaeologists, and anthropologists as a result.

Today we recognize that during past archaeological excavations, in many cases, the wishes of the deceased individual, their next of kin, or their descendant community were not sought and/or were excluded from the decision the Museum made to collect their bodies.

This new policy is necessary as we no longer want to make unilateral decisions about our collections, but want to ensure that we consult with the correct stakeholders. In the case of ancestor remains, we believe that a minimum standard of informed consent should apply when decisions are made about a person's body. This includes the right to

decide what will be done to one's body after death and the bodies of one's relatives and ancestors.

5. What does curating human remains mean?

This policy guides our staff and board in all decision-making for any activities related to the human remains in our collection. The most common curatorial activities covered by this policy include:

- Holding people's remains in our collections
- Collecting human remains; accepting new human remains into our collection
- Exhibition of human remains
- Research on ancestor remains
- Loaning ancestor remains to other institutions
- Providing access to people's remains for research
- Providing educational access to human remains
- Providing access to ancestor remains for photography
- Answering requests for photographic reproductions of people's remains
- Answering requests for reproduction casting of human remains

This policy also helps the staff determine the most appropriate storage, cataloging, documenting, and handling practices for the remains we steward as well as spiritual care for human remains when appropriate.

6. How does this policy relate to NAGPRA ?

NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Return Act, is a federal law passed in 1990. The law provides guidelines for discussion with descendants and return of their ancestors' bodies, funerary objects, sacred objects, and other important items to federally recognized Native American communities.

We asked ourselves why we would have one standard for federally recognized ancestor remains, and a different one for the bodies of individuals whose descendants live in state recognized tribes—or for those located outside of the US. Because we agree with the underlying premise of NAGPRA—that Native rights were violated by museums and many items need to be returned—we have applied it to all the ancestor remains at the Museum, regardless of Federal recognition.

This policy will provide SDMoM with an approach to our work with human remains that is legally compliant, but also ethically applied. It shifts us from the position of being required to treat the remains of human beings with appropriate respect, to doing so as a matter of principle.

7. Why have some museums with similar collections decided NOT to implement similar policies?

Almost all museums are working on a continuum in relation to this issue and are grappling with the question of whether and how to curate ancestor remains. Most museums that hold human remains in the US have not implemented policies that require a standard of informed consent like this one. The museums that have decided not to implement policies like SDMOM's proposed policy differ in their understanding of best practice as related to informed consent.

Research using human remains in museum and university collections has resulted in advances in many areas of scientific understanding, including medicine and human evolution. The people who devote their professional lives to researching human biological collections are having a positive impact in many areas of human life. Many of us will live lives that are longer and will be healthier than prior generations as a result.

8. Why have some museums with similar collections decided to implement similar policies?

Many museums recognize that collecting practices of past generations no longer meet standards for current ethical practice. Some museums have implemented policies that overlap with this proposed policy, including the American Museum in Natural History in New York and Harvard's Peabody Museum. Both of these museums, founded in the same period as SDMOM, stopped exhibiting human remains in the past few years.

Other museums have adopted policies very similar to the one have adopted, such as the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (DMNS), The Burke Museum at the University of Washington, and the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver (MOA). These museums have returned all possible human remains in their collections, including to tribes without federal recognition, and internationally. DMNS recently conducted a nondenominational burial ceremony at a local cemetery for the remains in their collections that could not be affiliated to any known descendants.

If you have questions, concerns, seek clarification, or want to discuss this policy for any reason, please contact Ben Garcia, Deputy Director at bgarcia@museumofman.org