

Nullius in Verba: Artists, Corpses and Empiricism in Post-Enlightenment England and Beyond

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In this paper, I investigate the intersection of artistic training, anatomical science, and ethical inquiry in post-Enlightenment England, focusing on the Royal Academy of Arts and its use of anatomical casts made from human remains. Through the work of figures like William Hunter and Joshua Reynolds, I explore how the Academy embraced empirical observation to reshape artistic pedagogy and challenge the boundaries between art and science. Central to my analysis is the Anatomical Crucifixion, a cast created from the corpse of an executed criminal, which exemplifies the period's shifting attitudes toward the human body—from sacred entity to object of study. I then extend this historical examination to contemporary practices, particularly the controversial exhibition *Body Worlds*. Drawing connections between past and present, I argue that the ethical tensions surrounding the display of human remains—issues of consent, commodification, and spectacle—persist today. By placing these practices in conversation, I reflect on how institutions produce and legitimize knowledge through the display of the dead, and what these displays reveal about our ongoing struggle to balance scientific inquiry with respect for human dignity.

Introduction

In May 2024, the Royal Academy of Art in London reinstated their cast collection after a short renovation period; while many had been placed in storage temporarily during the construction period, some had been out of the public eye for many years before. The majority of the collection, numbering about 140 in total, is an impressive assemblage of plaster casts made from marble statues, ranging from ancient Greek and Roman pieces to works by Michelangelo, all purchased with the intent of being used by students to learn both anatomy and classical beauty ideals. It was required that young students first become adept at creating drawings of these sculpture casts before they would be allowed into the Life Drawing room, where they would then draw, paint and sculpt based on live human models. Although students had to first become successful at drawing based on plaster sculpture casts before being allowed to reference live human models, the bodies of deceased models were not off the table for use in their work. Among the casts reinstated at the Academy, three differentiate themselves by the nature of their reference; rather than taking the shape of famous pieces of classical sculpture, they were created using the remains of executed criminals (**Figure 1**). Each was made in a collaboration between artists and scientists, working together to obtain a cadaver and utilize it in the process of crafting an anatomical cast, with the intention that it would become a tool of learning for students of the Royal Academy.

Crossovers between the world of fine arts and medicine were not new. In particular, collaborations between anatomists and artists for the sake of creating anatomical studies were commonplace in Europe during and after the Enlightenment era. Although many anatomists were themselves skilled artists, they often called upon professional artists/engravers to aid in the creation of published content in order to most adequately convey their discoveries to a wider audience (Petherbridge, 1977). This commonplace collaboration points toward the overarching fixation on detailed accuracy and realism in the realm of anatomical illustrations,



Figure 1. The three plaster casts created using human remains, seen hanging in the Royal Academy. Photo credit: Goppion Photo Archive.

which is fitting to be an object of focus in a field so dedicated to precision with the goal of empirical, objective truth. The establishment of The Royal Society in 1660 was inspired by the “new science”—the scientific method that has been shaping our world since the seventeenth century. The Society’s first charter, written in 1662, established the motto “Nullius in verba,” or “Take

nobody's word for it." This motto was indicative of the Society's dedication to peer-reviewing and experimentation for the purpose of constantly challenging established ideas, as well as the degree to which they valued hands-on experience. Initially composed of men from various backgrounds and professions, the formation of the Society was demonstrative of a more widespread interest in experimentation and exploration in fields that had previously been defined by knowledge passed down through generations of practitioners. This moment marked a departure from centuries of reliance on ancient texts and religious dogma, giving rise to a more evidence-based approach.

Starting in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, observers increasingly noted that, despite England's accomplishments in science and literature, it lacked comparable distinction in the visual arts—no English painters had achieved the renown of the nation's celebrated poets or natural philosophers (Kemp, 1992). William Hunter, who would become the Academy's first Professor of Anatomy, would say: "When we have already gone so far beyond the ancients in science, in every thing besides, are we never to excel them in works of imagination?" (cited in Kemp, 1975). This line is very much indicative of the idea behind the foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768; while England had long since emphasized furthering themselves in fields like science, the arts had been neglected. The Academy's first President, Joshua Reynolds, would allude to this in the dedication of his *Discourses*:

"By your illustrious predecessors were established marts for manufacturers, and colleges for science; but for the arts of elegance, those arts by which manufactures are embellished, and science is refined, to found an Academy was reserved for your Majesty" (Reynolds, 1797).

Both Reynolds and Hunter intended for the Academy to go forth educating students on the 'scientific' principles of art—it was by this method they sought to differentiate themselves from other academies across the continent. The term "scientific principles of art," as used by Reynolds and Hunter, referred to the emphasis on empirical observation and systematic study of anatomy as foundational to creating accurate representations of the human body. This contrasted with earlier art training that prioritized idealized forms over observational accuracy.

Teaching Anatomy in Art

The detailed study of anatomy as a part of an artist's curriculum was likewise not a new phenomenon; *écorché*, the French word for "flayed," is often used to describe the practice of visually recreating the figure of a human or animal with its skin removed to reveal the complex muscle and skeletal structure. Since the 15th century, western artists had been incorporating such studies into their portfolio with the intent of bettering their ability to realistically depict bodies in all sorts of poses, their future work guided by a complex understanding of how the body moved and operated. It became a standard component of classical artistic training, with the idea that one must fully understand every detail of how the body works in order to successfully render it realistically—a cornerstone of classical French art education that was adopted into the curricula of academies across Europe.

Many paintings and drawings have been created of anatomy lessons taking place in both medical and art academies, sometimes

in close quarters gathered around a table or within a large dissection theater. There are certain trademarks of these works that all appear very similarly across the different countries in which they were created: a congregation of smartly dressed men, writing utensils in one hand and paper in the other as the lecturer pointed to and explained details about what they were meant to draw. However, although on a surface level these lessons all appeared to be quite similar, there was some variety in the lecturers' intended outcome for the students in attendance. Art historian Andrew Graciano, in his paper "Anatomy in the Drawing Room," wrote about how formal art academies in Europe had "long privileged historical subjects," with beginner-level students often being required to base drawings off casts and classical sculptures before moving on to drawing based on a live model (Graciano, 2019). The imitation of the idealized anatomy in such sculptures would become internalized by art students over time, giving them a mental "catalog of perfection" with which to "'correct' the inevitably flawed living model" (Reynolds, 1797). The Academy's first President, Joshua Reynolds, would write about this "principal defect," wherein students would "change the form according to their vague and uncertain ideas of beauty, and make a drawing rather of what they think the figure ought to be, than of what it appears" (Reynolds, 1797). As they were drawing, students would in real time alter the figure before them in order for it to conform to classical art standards of beauty and the ideal form as they had been taught by hours of close study.

This long-standing component of artistic education was one facet where President Joshua Reynolds and William Hunter, Professor of Anatomy, sought to differentiate themselves from other institutions of art education. They intended for the Royal Academy to operate grounded in what they saw as the "scientific principles of art." Hunter's lessons were specifically crafted around the idea that students should start by drawing exactly what they see to develop a deep understanding of how the body operated and what it looked like doing so, with the belief that "to make solid proficiency in the study of any Art, it is observed that it is of infinite service to be grounded in its Elements, its scientific and demonstrable principles" (Hunter, cited Kemp, 1975). He would carry out dissections for the students of the academy to be audience to, as well as give detailed lectures with the assistance of a live model, cadaver cast, and skeletal remains all at once. In each lecture, Hunter would choose a single muscle group to discuss in great detail, utilizing his various models to give examples of each all the way from flesh to bone. "Hunter's lecture about one aspect of the whole body, albeit in depth, considering the interrelation of skin, muscles and bones, provided his audience with a focused accuracy informed by science" (Graciano, 2019). Hunter intended for his students to develop a deep understanding of the body and its functions so that they could recreate it faithfully rather than be influenced by the style consistencies of antiquity. Academy President Joshua Reynolds would later go on to clarify that merely imitating nature was not the highest form of art, and that it was up to artists to consider the abstract and perfect the imperfections of nature, thus making her more beautiful. He described the base understanding of nature as the mechanical components of art, which should serve as the foundation for an artist before moving on to the poetic components, using artistic expertise to create something more beautiful than how it existed originally. In an article comparing and contrasting the beliefs of

both Reynolds and Hunter, Oxford Art Historian Martin Kemp described the anatomist's approach to art:

"Hunter, by contrast, had come to espouse an uncompromising empiricism, and took his place on the extreme wing of characteristically British tradition. He was utterly committed to observational science, founded upon minute scrutiny, systemic description in words and images, and inductive analysis" (Kemp, 1992).

To aid his teachings, William Hunter would go on to create several *écorché* style casts with the help of flayed corpses that he was able to acquire due to his history as a surgeon and connections within the field of anatomy. Since the establishment of the Murder Act in 1752, surgeons had been the primary recipients of corpses from the gallows—the bodies of convicted murderers, condemned to the post-mortem punishment of dissection, which was most often performed for educational purposes. Its long title being "An Act for better preventing the horrid Crime of Murder," the act was created in response to a widespread panic particularly centralized in London, which was the result of several homicides being heavily discussed and sensationalized by the press (Tarlow, 2018). Prior, those convicted of murder had already been fated to receive capital punishment; yet, it was determined by lawmakers that the extremity of this retribution was not severe enough to be a significant deterrent. Thus, they created the Murder Act with the intent "that some further terror and peculiar mark of infamy be added to the punishment of death" (Pickering, 1765). The law went beyond solely a death sentence for the convicted and added on the awareness that after death, one's body would not be subject to any sort of formal burial. Their postmortem location was either public dissection and anatomization or the gibbet, where the corpse would be hung in chains and left to decompose in front of the eyes of the living with whom they had once been a member of. Throughout the law's lifespan, 1166 individuals would be sentenced to death, and of them, 80% would be given to practitioners of medicine for dissection and anatomization (King, 2000). This act proved to be insufficient in meeting the demands for corpses available to carry out dissections upon as the fields of medicine and surgery rapidly advanced, with increased populations of students for whom teachers of anatomy would need to acquire corpses to educate them. To make up for this gap between supply and demand, individuals known as "resurrectionists" began unearthing newly buried corpses to sell them directly to medical academies. At times, the bodies would be stolen from the graves directly by teachers and students. The issue would culminate in 1828 when it was discovered that two men, William Burke and William Hare, had carried out at least 16 murders of victims whose bodies they would immediately sell to the University of Edinburgh. The Anatomy Act of 1832 would eventually give surgeons and medical students access to any and all unclaimed bodies ("An Act for regulating Schools of Anatomy," 1832). The eighteenth to nineteenth century was a period notable for high levels of usage of human cadavers as tools.

On January 15th of 1770, the Royal Academy Council minutes record that "The President was desired to make an application to the Master of the Surgeons Company for a body to be [dissected] in the Royal Academy by Hunter," and the March minutes of that year record intent to reimburse Hunter for the corpse (accessed

via Stephen, 2019). It is unclear which of his anatomical casts this particular cadaver would be utilized for—only two of the casts made using flayed criminal corpses still exist in the collections of the Academy today. One of these is an untitled *écorché* figure created in 1771, which is less identifiable with the living in that its face has been deconstructed down to skeleton and muscle (**Figure 2**). Although both of the other anatomical casts were also created with a flayed body, they have not been painted over and remain a single color, which serves to help disguise the degree to which the body has been deconstructed for the piece. In this standing figure, the bright red color of the musculature contrasted with the lighter hues used for the visible joints and sinews clinging to them make blatant to the viewer that what they are seeing is a bodily interior, an anatomical model which retains an obvious connection to the realm of science and is thus easy to view with a more clinical and impersonal perspective. The other figure created

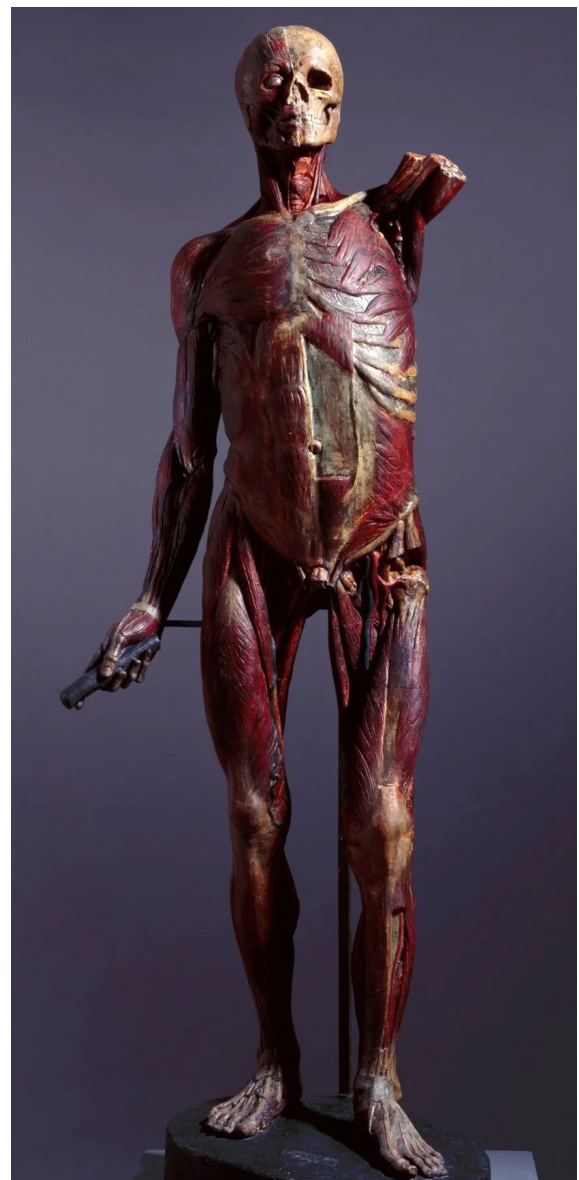


Figure 2. Unidentified maker (production supervised by William Hunter), *Écorché* figure, cast probably 1771. Plaster cast. 1715 mm x 610 mm x 475 mm, Weight: 65 kg. © Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London.

under the supervision of Hunter and made with the assistance of a real corpse is the *Smugglerius* cast (**Figure 3**), modeled after the ancient Roman statue *The Dying Gaul*. The subject has his face angled downwards, hiding his expression: because in the original *Dying Gaul* statue the man's face is lifted and slightly visible, it is possible that the creators of the *Smugglerius* made an intentional effort to hide the face as it would have been difficult to manipulate the cadaver's face so as to imitate the reference.



Figure 3. William Pink (production supervised by Agostino Carlini, R.A.), *Smugglerius*. 1834, (original cast ca. 1775). Plaster cast. 755 mm. Photograph © The Royal Academy of Arts, London.

The third cast possessed by the Academy is that of a flayed male corpse hanging from a cross. Named the *Anatomical Crucifixion*, it combines the visible face and singular coloration of the other two pieces, and it is these factors that make it the most recognizable as a once-living body (**Figure 4**). One of the most disturbing features of the cast is the expression, particularly the eyes. Upon first glance, it appears that the figure has had their head lolled to the side, eyes closed and mouth slightly open, appearing to suggest that either the crucified victim had already succumbed to their injuries and died, or was no longer capable of mustering the energy to keep their head raised and eyes open. However, the shape of the eyes present the most tell-tale evidence of the violence this body experienced before ending up in this cast state: they are exceedingly rounded, bulging out from the face as a result of the hanging of the cadaver model James Legg. The face and its evidence of the death experienced by its owner are the most visceral reminders of the fact that this sculpture cast was molded from the body of a real man, sentenced to death for the crime of murder.

The Anatomical Crucifixion

The name *Anatomical Crucifixion* is almost snide sounding, seeming to say that as opposed to all other crucifixion depictions, this one is the most anatomically correct rendition. Indeed, its creation was inspired by a desire among several artists to prove their theory that, although a scene recreated by many great artists, classical depictions of the crucifixion of Christ did not appear “natural” (*Obituary*, 1846). Three members of the Royal Academy—sculptor Thomas Banks, portrait painter Richard Cosway, and the current Academy President Benjamin West—approached prominent surgeon Joseph Constantine Carpue to request his assistance in procuring a body with which they could imitate the crucifixion position and create a model with which to prove whether they had been correct in their

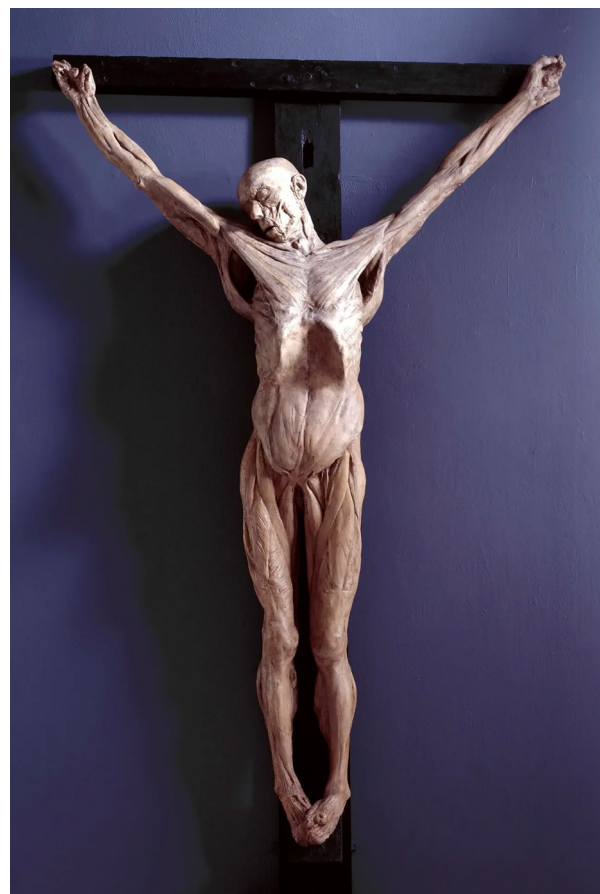


Figure 4. Thomas Banks, R.A., *Anatomical Crucifixion* (James Legg), 1801. Plaster cast, early 19th century. 2315 mm x 1410 mm x 340 mm, Weight: 74 kg. Photograph © The Royal Academy of Arts, London.

theory. William Hunter had passed away in 1783, predating the creation of this cast made in 1801. Thus, the Academy artists had seen Carpue as their point of contact between the art world and science, and therefore their key to accessing a cadaver for use in their anatomical study. All three artists involved in the creation of this gruesome piece would have been students of the academy before the death of Hunter, and so would have taken lessons of anatomy under him, which may have been the inspiration for this particular project. What we can understand as certain inspiration for this undertaking was an alleged story about Michelangelo, wherein he was said to have tied a model to a crucifix before stabbing him to death in order to obtain an accurate concept of the impact of crucifixion on the human body. As written by European Art Historian Meredith Gamer, this story appears to have been well-known in the early nineteenth century as it was recounted by the Academy artists and appeared in a *Morning Chronicle* publication (Gamer, 2014). In his final addition to his *Discourses*, Joshua Reynolds, who would have been President within the three artists' time at the Academy, placed great emphasis on the work of Michelangelo, whom he referred to as the “founder and father of modern art” (Reynolds, 1797). He discussed how Michaelangelo wielded a profound understanding of not only the mechanical, scientific nature of his subjects, but that he also possessed the ability to poeticize the subject matter, aestheticizing it to the point of achieving greatness.

"I will not say that Michaelangelo was eminently poetical, only because he was greatly mechanical; but I am sure that mechanic excellence invigorated and emboldened his mind to carry paintings into the regions of poetry..." (Reynolds, 1797).

At the end of this speech, Reynolds finished off with saying the name Michaelangelo one last time, having decided that he desired the name to be his final words spoken in the Academy chair. It is worth considering whether this speech had such a profound effect on the Academists so as to inspire them to want to reattempt his supposed anatomical experiment.

After the artists approached Joseph Carpue, he got to work sourcing a corpse for their use in the creation of the casts. Because only the bodies of executed murderers were available for use, surgeons would keep track of legal proceedings and maintain contact with colleagues in order to be aware of any upcoming executions, soon-available bodies that they could lay claim to. Shortly after submitting the application for a corpse subject, an incident took place at the Chelsea Hospital in October 1801, which led to a cadaver becoming available: that of an elderly man named James Legg. The Chelsea Hospital ran on a military-like system wherein ex-military inhabitants would become Captains of their own company composed of other patients; Legg was one of these Captains and had recently fought with a fellow pensioner before shooting him in the chest ("Dying Behaviour, &c. of James Legg," 1801). Before a charter addendum to the Murder Act created in 1822, it was required that the place to which an executed corpse was delivered be within 400 yards of the execution site. Because of this, a building was erected near the location at which Legg was set to be executed, and stocked with the wood for a crucifix as well as other materials necessary for the cast creation. In order for it to appear the most "accurate," the process of transporting and posing the cadaver was done quickly so that rigor mortis would not have time to completely set in before they had the chance to place the corpse on a cross and allow it to fall into place. The Academicians and Carpue attended Legg's execution, where he was to meet his end alongside a man who had murdered his own wife, Richard Stark. The "event" was attended by hundreds of onlookers, and, "after hanging the usual time [the men] were cut down and delivered to the surgeons for dissections" ("Dying Behaviour, &c. of James Legg," 1801). Legg was taken to the designated space in which the casts were to be created. One plaster cast was created with his entire body intact, and another—the one that is still visible in the Royal Academy today—was completed after the corpse had been flayed. This is similar to the other two casts that had been created when Hunter was still working at the Academy: all three of the plaster casts still exist only in their final state of exposed muscle.

Implications

What does it mean to disturb the ephemerality of a corpse? Historically, the human corpse held sacred value, often afforded burial rituals to mark its social and religious significance. The transition toward treating corpses as empirical tools reflected the broader Enlightenment shift toward scientific rationalism. Yet, this utilitarian approach to human remains raises profound ethical dilemmas: at what point does the pursuit of knowledge override the need for dignity?

The shift in perception was not merely due to scientific advancement but was also influenced by cultural and legal changes, including increasing secularization and changes in penal practices. The use of executed criminals' bodies, seen as a posthumous extension of punishment, marks the convergence of public justice, education, and art. During the period in which James Legg had been executed, the act of denying a corpse burial was seen as an extension of capital punishment. Part of that punishment was the knowledge of one's corpse being exposed to the eyes of many, whether in a dissection theater or hung in chains; there would in both instances, however, be a point at which the corpse decayed beyond being recognizable, no longer visually identifiable with the living person it had once been. If we are to regard the public display of one's corpse as a punishment, one could surmise that to capture in visual media the appearance of one's corpse would seem to extend that punishment indefinitely. Indeed, after its creation, the cast would be displayed in varying locations and viewed by many who flocked to it with curiosity and eagerness to examine the figure. However, among those viewing it were individuals who were learning from it intending to improve their art, which served the purpose designated by its creators. The creators of this piece would not likely have considered it as something meant to prolong the punishment of its subject, but rather as a valuable tool of education. It is not simply a macabre reminder of the price to be paid for committing a capital crime, but instead becomes an image of restitution "as it takes the body of a murderer—one who committed the ultimate crime against society—and puts it into the service of that society" (Gamer, 2014). After both James Legg's flayed corpse and the cast had been displayed for a short period of time, Thomas Banks would write to the Royal Academy that he desired they take the *Anatomical Crucifixion* into their collection so that it could be utilized as a useful tool for the Academy students and professor of Anatomy (Banks, accessed via Gamer, 2014). The Academy would accept his proposal and by 1802 the cast was on display.

The *Anatomical Crucifixion* provokes intrigue, particularly in the fact that it was not created by or under the request of an anatomist, unlike the prior casts overseen by William Hunter. The piece was created not only to better grasp human anatomy, but with the intent of specifically interrogating the appearance of a crucified body: an image that has been recreated countless times by artists of all skill levels. This means that there existed an exhaustive catalogue of works to reference if one sought to create their own crucifixion scene; the creation of an anatomical tool for the purpose of more accurately depicting a crucified body is representative of a widespread belief at the time when rapid scientific advancement had brought into question the act of relying upon pre-existing knowledge and emphasized personal investigation and experience. At the time of its creation, two of the artists involved were in the process of creating pieces involving the crucifixion scene. Benjamin West was in the midst of designing the monumental west window of Saint George's chapel at Windsor Castle, while Richard Cosway was working on a series of detailed drawings depicting scenes from throughout the life of Christ (Gamer, 2014). Their choice to create an anatomical model of the Crucifixion brought both religion and art into conversation with principles of the scientific revolution, as it regarded direct observation and evidence over received knowledge. Their collective treatment of the human

corpse as a tool of empirical study was indicative of the shift from corpses being viewed as particularly sacred objects with intrinsic value, which had been happening over the course of the last century. These cadaver casts would go on to become staples in the sketchbooks of the many artists who passed through the Royal Academy, immortalizing them in countless images.

We live in a time when museum collections are facing growing scrutiny over what is appropriate to display, even as visual documentation and the sharing of information have expanded dramatically. Alongside the questions of how and why the remains were acquired, the major ethical dilemma regarding the display of human remains involves complex discussions of the corpse as property, discussions that become even more complicated as topics like consent and religion are introduced. One main justification for displaying remains—that it serves a greater purpose for the betterment of humanity through education—has reappeared in contemporary public discussions and social critique whenever the question of using human corpses as tools arises. The British Museum website has a page dedicated to its collection of human remains, and on the subject of display states: “Surveys show that most visitors are comfortable with and expect to see human remains as an element of our Museum displays” (Fletcher, 2014). The controversial travelling exhibition *Body Worlds*, which was investigated in 2004 after claims arose that their plastinated body displays were created using the remains of executed Chinese prisoners, has been repeatedly criticized in the media, and remains a subject of ethical debate. Like the British Museum, the *Body Worlds* website has a page detailing the results of a survey conducted at the end of their exhibitions across several cities, stating that 87% of the visitors stated that they knew more about the human body after their tour (Fonseca, 2013).

The ethical tensions present in historical anatomical casts are paralleled by modern controversies, particularly surrounding the aforementioned *Body Worlds* exhibition. Created by Gunther von Hagens, *Body Worlds* features plastinated human corpses posed in dynamic, sometimes theatrical positions and is framed as both educational and artistic. Despite claims of public health benefit and anatomical education, the exhibition has drawn criticism for sensationalism and commodification of the human body (Goulding et al., 2013). Visitors often experience conflicting reactions—fascination, discomfort, even reverence—when confronted with these carefully staged corpses. The exhibition’s success, reportedly drawing over 29 million attendees globally, underscores the ongoing allure of death when mediated through the lens of science and spectacle. Critics argue that *Body Worlds* transforms human remains into aesthetic commodities, stripping bodies of personal identity while highlighting the body as both machine and object. As Christina Goulding and colleagues have observed, this dehumanizing treatment allows viewers to dissociate the exhibits from their once-living origins, mirroring historical instances in which anatomical casts served educational aims while erasing individual identities (Goulding et al., 2013).

Goulding et al. outline five interpretive frameworks through which audiences read the *Body Worlds* displays: as spectacle, as mortality salience, as commodity, as machine, and as dehumanized body. These readings, deeply dependent on audience subjectivity, underscore the exhibition’s paradox. The plastinated corpses are both objectified and aestheticized; they are

emotionally distanced yet viscerally intimate. Exhibits such as a pregnant woman with her fetus exposed evoke both educational intrigue and ethical discomfort, challenging viewers to reconcile the bodies’ prior humanity with their current objecthood. The intentional staging—chess-playing skeletons, yogic poses, flayed ballerinas—intensifies the spectacle, and thus risks trivializing the deceased even as it claims to promote anatomical education.

Moreover, the commercial success of the exhibition complicates its claims to public good. While von Hagens positions himself as a democratizing force reclaiming dissection from the medical elite, others see *Body Worlds* as exploitative—a blend of macabre entertainment and for-profit science. The boundary between museum and sideshow becomes blurred, reflecting not only modern society’s complex relationship with death but also a consumerist approach to mortality, where corpses become both spectacle and brand.

This modern manifestation of anatomical display reinforces the argument that the ethical dilemmas explored in historical contexts remain deeply relevant today. Whether in the halls of the Royal Academy or in global touring exhibitions, the presentation of human remains continues to straddle the uneasy line between scientific inquiry, artistic expression, and public consumption. After being retrieved from storage only last year, the Royal Academy casts have been placed back on display in the Academy halls. In a video made announcing the reinstallment, Head of Fine Art Processes Mark Hampson acknowledges that “in the contemporary art school, the casts don’t have an obvious teaching purpose or function.” He elaborates that they are no longer needed as the “kind of Google Image search they were for the Georgian students.” Despite this, as with the previously mentioned displays around the world which feature depictions of or actual human remains, they continue to be placed before audiences for the purpose of education or inspiration. The ethical dilemmas surrounding the display of plaster casts made from human bodies and the use of plastinated corpses in exhibitions like *Body Worlds* reveal enduring tensions between scientific inquiry, artistic representation, and public spectacle. Both practices raise fundamental questions about consent, the treatment of human remains, and the role of institutions in curating images of death for educational or aesthetic purposes.

This complication is an ongoing ethical paradox: the human corpse, once removed from its social identity, is often treated as an anonymous specimen rather than a former person. The tension between scientific utility and ethical responsibility persists, with modern debates mirroring historical anxieties over bodily autonomy and institutional authority. Whether displayed in an 18th-century art academy or a contemporary traveling exhibition, the use of preserved human bodies forces us to confront fundamental questions about dignity, consent, and the limits of educational display. While our understanding of ethics has evolved, the underlying dilemma remains unchanged: at what point does the pursuit of knowledge come at the cost of human respect? Visual media is created and shared now more than ever before, and in a society where most people have access to image search engines, it’s increasingly difficult to justify the use of real corpses to create empirical tools for the purpose of allowing individuals to see something with their own eyes. Rapid advancement necessitates constant interrogations of ethical and moral standards.

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