Counts, S. (2025) Uncomfortable encounters: expected and unexpected experiences with human remains in museums
Revista Chilena de Antropología 52: 1-11
https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-1472.2025.82750

Uncomfortable encounters: expected and unexpected experiences with human remains in museums

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ABSTRACT

The following article looks at the ethical considerations of displaying Human Remains in museums, considering both the deceased as well as the museum visitor. Using autoethnographic examples from various museum contexts, I discuss how encounters with Human Remains can be uncomfortable both when they are expected and unexpected. Drawing on various professional and legal codes of ethics and statements regarding the treatment of Human Remains in collections, I ask how we may, as anthropologists, tackle this issue of humanity for both the living and the deceased in museum spaces as we continue to navigate this ethical dilemma.

Key words: museums, human remains, repatriation, indigenous, ethics.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2024, updated NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) guidelines stated that American museums receiving federal funding could no longer display, exhibit, or research Indigenous[1] Human Remains without formal consent from the Native Nations associated with the Remains. For many, 2024 was far too late a date to make this form of display illegal as ethical standards in the field often discourage the display of Human Remains (American Aliance of Museums, 2025; Association of Black Anthropologists, 2021; American Anthropological Association , 2024; Society of American Archaeology, 2021; International Council of Museums International & Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History,2013; National Park Service, 2023) without explicit consent. In my professional practice as a curator working in the United States, the display of Human Remains (Native and non-Native) has been highly contested and a serious ethical divide among scholars and curators long before these updated regulations were enacted (Alberti et al., 2015; Biers,2020; Colwell, 2017; Jones & Whitaker, 2013). While some continue to argue for the need for display for scientific and educational reasons (often in public forums rather than formal

[1] Here I use the term "Indigenous" to refer to Federally Recognized Tribes of the United States of America. I also use the terms Native and Native Nations to with the same significance. Global Indigenous communities are distinguished from Indigenous North American communities.

publications), others, including myself, argue against these displays and continued retention of Human Remains within museum collections due to various ethical and humanitarian considerations (Butler,2023; Counts,2025; Giunta, 2010).
History shows that body collection, research, and display has always been politicized through structures of power. Marginalization based on class, race, criminal history, national origin, or even lack of medical care/lack of individuals to protect a deceased individual after death have led to predispositions to body collection, dissection, and display without consent (Tarle, 2020). Therefore, historically the places where one might encounter Human Remains in the museum – medical museums, anthropology/archaeology museums, and even history museums – have oftentimes produced a nonconsensual encounter. Even when these encounters are expected by the visitor, there are affective implications on encounters with Human Remains in institutionalized settings (Counts, 2025; Krmpotich, Fontein & Harries, 2010; Peers, Renius & Shannon, 2017) that beg the questions of why, how, when, and in what context could or should these encounters happen?

I, a white, non-Native, cisgender, able bodied, queer woman have, throughout my career stood firmly on the side of never condoning the display of Human Remains, regardless of cultural or ethnic background of the deceased, without explicit consent. Even with consent, there are additional ethical considerations to take into account, including the consent of the viewer and the manner and context of display. However, the retention and collection of Human Remains – rather than exhibition and display – has, for much of its history, dominated the identity of the institution I work for, the McClung Museum of Natural History and Culture at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville located in the southern United States. Further rootedness in both my professional practice as a curator of global material culture and a scholar of museums and Indigenous Studies has put me in a position to constantly be considering Human Remains within museum spaces. This has led me to understand many museums as hostile spaces for Indigenous people (Counts, 2025). Spaces that are often considered polluted by death (Counts, 2025; Lubar, 2022), something that I came to find throughout the research and writing phases of my dissertation that I too, came to experience and hold in high regard as to be true.

Proximity to death and haunting (Gordon, 2008; Supernant, 2020) within the space of the museum can create a plethora of opportunities for uncomfortable encounters, whether they are expected or unexpected. The autoethnographic vignette below describes several uncomfortable encounters I experienced while in my final years of graduate school completing my PhD at several institutions other than my own.

UNCOMFORTABLE ENCOUNTERS

Throughout my career alongside fieldwork and the writing phase of my dissertation, I had uncomfortable encounters with Human Remains in museums other than my home institution. The first came in January of 2023. After having attended a week-long conference in Lisbon, Portugal, Matt (my husband, unofficial research assistant, and archaeological consultant) and I had decided to take advantage of our last winter break as full time students and the fact that I had a university funded plane ticket to Europe to squeeze a celebratory vacation into our schedules. After the conference had ended, rather than heading back to the States, I booked a flight to Paris for myself. All my project management and logistical skills for my job were harnessed several months prior,

when I perfectly coordinated my flight from Lisbon to Paris with a flight for Matt from Knoxville to Paris. Our plan was to spend several days in Paris together before heading on the train to London. After several days in London, we would fly back home together. Seeing as it was early January, our itineraries in both cities consisted mostly of museum visits. The weather was less than enjoyable at this time of year, so a European museum montage seemed like the perfect way to spend our week. Matt had requested that while in Paris we visit the catacombs. While I was viscerally opposed to that particular destination, I agreed. While uncomfortable the entire time during our visit, having months to prepare for the experience and having substantial background knowledge on the creation and execution of the catacombs, I felt conflicted, but ultimately accepted our visit as it fell into an ethical grey area for me. However, one visit was enough, and I do not anticipate I would ever return. What I had not prepared for though, was my visceral and painful reaction and experience during our visit to Paris' Musée de L'Homme (Museum of Man). Our last full day in Paris we decided to take the metro to see the Arc de Trompe, Eiffel Tower, and visit our last museum for that leg of the trip, the Musée de L'Homme. Several days before had been dominated by art museums, and Matt and I were both excited for a change of pace. It was extremely rainy that day, and the grey, drizzly haze of the city made it perfect for a museum visit. Prior to our visit, the Musée de L'Homme was the museum I had done the least amount of research about. While I had done this partially out of lack of time to research all the museums in Paris, I subconsciously knew if I researched the museum prior, I may have talked us out of visiting. However, I felt it was important not for our trip, but more so for my dissertation, to have some perspective on an international anthropology museum. The week prior, while at the conference in Lisbon, the session I'd been presenting in on Repatriation had another speaker whose presentation was on the Repatriation of several skulls from the Museum of Man to a community in the Pacific (Green, 2023). He had revealed that Repatriation in France was difficult due to the political structure of museums and the laws surrounding their collections. France's public museum collections are held in public trust, meaning they belong to the French people collectively. Therefore, at the time of his presentation, the French government did not have the authority to Repatriate items or Human Remains without going through immensely complicated and often unfulfilling lengthy legal processes, as outcomes were often dictated in part by the French public.

After making our way into the museum, paying for our tickets, putting away our coats and grabbing a map, we headed into the gallery. The main gallery was set up in three parts with the first part being defined by the question "Who are We?" As soon as we entered this space, I felt myself become tense, I was immediately on edge and at first, I could not identify why. I was surrounded by anatomical models and, after initial inspection, told myself to relax as they were mostly made of plaster and wax as teaching models. As I let myself relax, I began to wander through the casework, slightly distancing myself from Matt as he tends to read all the available text, moving more slowly through museum spaces than I prefer. I then came to a case of skulls, which I initially thought were casts. Upon reading their English labels though, my stomach dropped, and tears welled up in my eyes. They were not casts, but rather the Remains of small children, dated to precontact Bolivia and Peru. I stood there and cried. As I stood there, a group of school children on a tour at the far end of the gallery had begun to make their way back towards the area where I was. Not seeming to pay any attention to their teacher, several of the children were running around chasing each other, playing what appeared to be tag. As they laughed and screamed in French, they began to run in circles around me, still standing still in front of the case of skulls. They acted both as if I and the casework full of other children's Remains were not there at all as they were completely enthralled

with whatever they were playing. By that time Matt had made his way over to where I was to complain about the noisy and disruptive children.
After I didn't immediately respond to his comment, he focused his attention on the casework and, in realizing my distress, suggested we continue on. As we continued to weave our way through the main exhibition space, we were met with more casework and exhibition space dedicated to material culture. I tried to relax myself yet again, focusing my attention and energy on the models, interactives, and objects on display. We eventually made our way into a smallish room built into the center of the exhibition in the middle of the gallery. It was open on one side, with casework lining the other three interior walls. The walls were painted black so that the objects inside, arranged in a cabinet of curiosities/natural history museum type display, really stood out. I immediately rested my eyes on a beautiful set of tarot cards on the far-left side of the display and went to have a closer look. Matt chose to start on the right side, so that we could meet in the middle and point out to each other what we'd found most interesting. Enamored with the tarot cards, I hadn't even noticed what else filled the space, as I hadn't paused to read any of the larger didactic text alluding to what tied everything in that space together curatorially. Once I had completed admiring the cards, I slowly turned, lifting my head up and to the right to see what was on display next. My eyes met those of a Chachapoyan mummy[2] on display, his face held in an eternal, agonizing silent scream. I stifled the scream that was fighting to escape my throat as my eyes grew wide, the expression on my face inherently matching his. Matt had also turned at that moment to watch me come face to face with this mummy. As quickly as I'd met the mummy's gaze, I turned and ran out of the room, his painful expression etched onto the backs of my eyelids every time I blinked for several months later.

There were more Human Remains to be encountered throughout the rest of the museum's main display. However, I was on high alert as we continued to move throughout the rest of the space. The second section of the main exhibition titled "Where do We Come From?" focused on the paleoanthropological history of humanity, and there were more spaces for these encounters. Luckily for me, those spaces were more clearly delineated so I was able to avoid them. The below paragraph is an excerpt from the English version of the museum's website, detailing one particular space.

THE ANCESTOR SHELTER[3]

A special area, off the main visit circuit, has been reserved for an encounter with the fragmented remains of *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis*. Skulls, fossilised bones and adornments are presented like treasures in carefully designed glass cases. Written explanations provide details about the circumstances surrounding their discovery. In 1868, at the Cro-Magnon shelter in Les Eyzies-de-Tayac in the Dordogne, Louis Lartet discovered several bones including the skull of an adult who lived 28,000 years ago, as well as adornments. Nicknamed "the old man", he is presented with a woman from the Pataud shelter and the head of the "Lady of Cavillon", covered in shells.

[2] While images of this and other Chachapoyan mummies are easily accessible on the internet, I very intentionally choose not to include one here. Rather, it is important to note that unlike Egyptian mummies, Chachapoya mummies are not wrapped, and are therefore completely exposed when presented in museums and academic texts.
[3] https://www.museedelhomme.fr/en/galerie-de-l-homme

After our day at the Museum of Man, I was troubled by the experiences I'd had. The images of the Chachapoyan mummy have stayed with me to this day. We were able to avoid mummies throughout the rest of our time in Europe, as our travels to London the following week were also marked by various museum visits. We were easily able to skip the Egyptian rooms at the British Museum all together (although I did take notice that they were the most densely packed area of the museum during our time there) and the London Museum of Natural History eased my tension with emphasis on dinosaur fossils and animal evolution. However, these troubling experiences were not limited to the European continent.

Almost precisely one year later, I had another troubling encounter, this time at an American museum. During the course of writing my dissertation, I saw a job opening announced at an academic museum I was interested in. While I was very happy with my job at the McClung and not actively looking for employment elsewhere, on paper this other job description was precisely my dream job and represented an opportunity for a serious advancement in my career. I decided to apply as a litmus test, to gauge whether I would be competitive for this sort of job once I had finished my degree. While I knew this museum had a strong Egyptology collection, I didn't think too much about the ramifications that collection might have on their permanent exhibitions in terms of Human Remains on display in the form of mummies. I applied in October of 2023 and then quickly forgot about it as my own work was immensely busy, and the holidays were rapidly approaching. In mid-December I received an email from the chair of their search committee requesting a Zoom interview. I agreed to the interview and did some brief background research on the museum and the specific collection I had applied to curate.

However, I subconsciously chose not to do a deeper dive for fear of what I might find. I did the interview and was immediately asked to schedule an on-site visit the first week of the new year, January 2024. As the possibility of being offered this job began to feel more serious, I began to do some deep and intensive research on the institution and its collections. Not on their website, but instead from a visitor photo on Google Reviews, is when I first saw the photo of one of the more popular mummies at their museum. Disheartened, I headed to their collections page on their website and filtered by "currently on view." I was immediately and once again, quite viscerally, upset by what I discovered, including the mummy I'd seen from the review photo as well as several bone fragments excavated from Palestine.[4] I immediately regretted applying and agreeing to do the site visit, however further conversations with Matt encouraged me to go anyway for the sake of professional development and the possibility of gleaning the fuller picture of their ethos regarding the display of Human Remains. Maybe I would learn something new about display that I hadn't thought of or been exposed to before. The job I had applied for was to primarily build up their contemporary Native American art collections and form better and stronger relationships between the museum and contemporary Native Nations. After discovering the mummy, I was not surprised that they had struggled to build these reciprocal networks and, as Matt pointed out "Maybe they just need someone to come in and point out the obvious to them." With all this in mind, I prepared for my initial site visit.

[4] Given the ongoing conflict in Palestine at the time of the interview (January 2024), I was concerned by the display of bone material that was not identified or denoted as faunal.

On the first floor of the museum a central lobby anchored two wings, one dedicated to Indigenous Arts and the other featuring Greek/Roman collections, Near Eastern collections, and, in the very back, the Egyptian collections. In the morning, I had approximately an hour to myself to wander the galleries in preparation for my meetings with the rest of the staff as well as the gallery talk, I was scheduled to give as part of my interview. Rather than spend all my time preparing in the Indigenous Arts section (which is the collection I had applied to curate), I chose to wander the whole floor to get a holistic feel of the gallery spaces. I made my way through Greece and Rome, popped my head into Near Eastern Arts and then finally made my way to Egypt. In order to enter the Egyptian galleries, you first had to walk through a long hallway with a slight upward grade. Before entering the hallway, I noticed a small sign signifying that there would be mummies on display in the gallery. Had I not had my eyes fixated on all the signage of the building; it would have been easy to miss. As I made my way down the hallway, I continued to pay note to the signage, most of it dedicated to thanking donors of the museum. When I got to the end of the hallway where an entryway marked the start of the gallery I paused. Here there was another sign, larger this time, noting (or maybe defending) the museum's reasoning for keeping the mummies on display. According to the sign, mummies were eternal bodies and were meant to be seen and revered by contemporary Egyptian peoples. As someone who has no grasp on current Egyptian ethical standards regarding mummies and Human Remains, I do not know if this is true or not and did wonder to myself why mummies would be enshrined in hard to reach tombs if they were meant to be publicly displayed.[5] After I finished reading the sign I looked ahead. The gallery was broken into several rooms, divided by walls but set up so that you could see though the different entryways into each room. The room to the right of the entrance contained no less than three visible mummies. I took a deep breath and tried to enter the gallery. I was frozen in place. Again, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, exhaled and tried to enter the space. My body physically would not allow me to enter the room. While my mind continued to try and convince my body to enter the space, it would not move. I involuntarily let out a series of small whimpers. After about five minutes of this back and forth between my mind and body, my mind finally won, and I stepped over the threshold into the gallery.

I found it difficult to move through the space, my feet heavy like lead with each step I took. I moved slowly and cautiously through the space, keeping my head down so as to not make eye contact with any of the mummies in the space. As I finally made my way into the larger room (the gallery was set up so that you walk through a series of smaller rooms that circle the larger room that you enter last) I was fighting back tears. Right before entering the larger room with the mummies, I saw him, the mummy I had seen on Google Reviews during my previous research. He was displayed in a small alcove on the front side of the larger room so that he was hidden out of sight when you first entered the gallery. I did not approach him. Instead, with another deep breath, I put my head down and walked through the largest gallery in order to exit the space, having to pass between two sarcophaguses with open lids in floor cases to make my way to the exit. Once I made my way back to the hallway leading out of the gallery I all but ran back to the other side of the floor towards Indigenous Arts.

[5] See Khalil (2024) regarding the display of mummies/Egyptian Human Remains in Egyptian museums.

Difficult is the word I used later that night to describe what it was like being in that space. Later that afternoon I was scheduled to meet with the other curators at the museum. At first, we shared pleasantries and the Egyptian curator[6] in particular was very complimentary of the gallery talk I had just given. The four of us spoke casually as I reiterated my personal curatorial methodology and my professional priorities. I was greatly enjoying the conversation, feeling as if I already fit in well with the rest of the curatorial cohort. When it was time for me to ask questions, I began with what I thought was the obvious: "What is the museum's future plan for the display of Human Remains?" With this question, the Egyptian curator's demeanor completely changed, and the room filled with tension. The other curator in the room squirmed, and I sensed their discomfort. The Egyptian curator became increasingly defensive and a bit patronizing in their answer to me. They explained that within Egyptian culture, the display of the deceased is perfectly acceptable. As professionally as possible, I explained that I understood that and that was not the issue I was met with. Rather, the position for which I was applying was based largely on building stronger relationships with contemporary Native Nations, and, as I explained, I was concerned with the feasibility of that given the presence of Human Remains in the gallery. The curator said, "Native people just need to understand and respect Egyptian culture, I can't believe this is such an issue for them!" in an aggressive and dismissive tone. I was genuinely taken aback and attempted to remain professional while also being firm and holding my ground, as the curator had a PhD and was at least twenty years my senior. "Respect for other cultures isn't the problem," I responded, "Native people are completely aware that other cultures have different protocols for their deceased." "The problem," I continued, "is that regardless of what culture the deceased belong to, having them on display causes literal harm – physical, mental, and spiritual – to Native people entering the space. For example, at my current institution when I am working with a Native artist, before they come into the museum, I have to let them know there are Ancestors in the space."

At this moment the curator interrupted me to say, "Ancestors in the museum, well that's just egregious!" in disgust. The other curator was stone cold silent during this entire exchange, their eyes on the floor. "Yes, it is upsetting there are still Ancestors in our space," I responded, trying not to show my anger or frustration, as there were also Ancestors housed within this museum's space apart from the mummies. I tried to refocus myself and my argument, as I could tell I was getting nowhere. "There has to be a solution where we can get everyone to 'yes'," the Egyptian curator said. Grasping to salvage the conversation I rambled on with something along the lines of working in constant communication and being creative and flexible and that I already had some ideas and on and on. My response felt hollow though, as I felt defeated and disappointed by the conversation. Realizing I was getting nowhere, I changed the subject by asking what a typical workday looked like for each curator. We continued talking and the meeting eventually came to an end as I had other conversations I had to get to.

Later that evening, I had dinner with three members of the search committee. One of which was a non-Native museum employee, and the other two were Native faculty and staff members (not museum employees) at the university the museum was affiliated with. I had met with the two of them prior to dinner and been honest about my concerns with working with the Egyptian curator

[6] I refer to the curator this way to say that they are the curator of the Egyptian collection, but they themselves are not Egyptian ethnically or nationally. They are, as many museum curators are (myself included), a white academic.

and serving as an ambassador for Native interests in the museum setting. They let me know they had similar concerns and had been asking the museum to take down the mummies for years. During dinner, as we continued this conversation, the museum staff member also chimed in to let me know that I was not alone in my concerns, and that the majority of the rest of the museum staff also wanted the mummies to be taken off view. They shared my frustration as I summarized my conversation with the curator with them and said that they were disappointed I'd had that experience, but they weren't surprised. The educator seemed sincere as the four of us discussed potential strategies – in the realm of the hypothetical if I were to get and accept the job – about how best to move forward. Given that it was the end of the long day and we were in the intimate setting of dinner, the museum staff member offered up an anecdote that they saw as potential evidence or fuel for our goal. "Every year," they began, "during kids camps we inevitably have a small number of children who faint at the museum. Sometimes it's because they are fasting for religious reasons and other times it just because of the heat and humidity, but," they paused and bit their lip, looked down for a moment and gave a chuckle that conveyed a sense of irony, "for some reason the children always faint when we are in the Egypt gallery near the mummies." At hearing this I aggressively raised my eyebrows and met the gaze of one of the Native faculty members. They and I shared a moment of understanding before they said, "In my worldview, that tells me that there are things going on that we cannot begin to understand, but that they are related to the continued display of the mummies." "Even though they are not Native," the other faculty member chimed in, "they are still Ancestors and Relatives." I nodded my head in understanding and, despite having been 'on' for what was now approaching a twelve plus hour interview day, again shared my concerns about the requirements of the position given the lack of flexibility from the Egyptian curator. We did not reach an answer or a solution that evening, as the three search committee members could sense my exhaustion and moved the conversation on to much lighter topics.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS ON ENCOUNTERS

I offer the encounters described above as examples of interacting with Human Remains while they are on display, both expected and unexpected, to open a conversation among anthropologists about the continued display of Human Remains in a global context. While this conversation has been ongoing (AAM, 2025; ABA, 2021; AAA, 2024; SAA, 2021; ICOM, 2013; NPS, 2023) it is one that deserves continued attention, consideration, care, and above all else, humanity. As anthropologists, we are uniquely positioned to inject all that we do with humanity. Now, more than ever, I feel that museums must be sites of humanity. They should be places to share stories, be in community with one another, and be sites of critical and nuanced discussions of what it means to be human. This may sometimes elicit the suggestion of the display of Human Remains, but here I ask the question of whether or not an empathetic and humanity driven approach – both for visitors to the museum and those being displayed – is possible?

If we put NAGPRA aside and approach the display of Human Remains from a purely ethical perspective rather than a legal one, we are left with questions such as "Why should we or should we not display Human Remains?" Or even, "Whose Remains should we or can we display and in what context?" These questions can and should be posed to an international audience. Is displaying Human Remains different in Europe than in the United States than in China or Australia or Chile?

And does it matter who those Remains belong to? Does it matter if the Peruvian Ancestor is displayed in Paris or the Egyptian Ancestor displayed in North America?

If we look at NAGPRA as a base level foundation for potential display, consent is required. This, in many circles, seems obvious. Does a Native Nation consent to the display of Ancestral Remains? Do Lineal Descendants consent to the display? If we go a step farther, we might ask if the deceased consents to display. In many cases there is no answer, so the answer must be no. However, how often do we ask the visitor if they consent to viewing Human Remains?

Many of us, myself included, may not consent to viewing Human Remains, even if they are displayed in the most ethical manner possible, with full consent from the deceased. This can be for a number of reasons, many of which may be incredibly personal. So how might museums consider the visitor in this scenario? Many already include signage signaling display so a visitor might be able to opt out of viewing a particular gallery or exhibition. But what about those of us who would rather not be in a building with Human Remains on display at all, even if we never venture into the gallery they are located in? Further transparency for museums and institutions would require signage on the outside of buildings, information regarding Human Remains on websites, and further notions of consent, for both the viewer and the viewed. Indigenous colleagues of mine have shared how proximity to death can be harmful to the living, even if the dead are of a different culture and/or consented to being housed or displayed within a museum. How can museums mitigate this harm, for both the living and the deceased?

The biggest takeaway from my seven years of graduate work was not a scholastic one, being able to cite the most important theorists of cultural anthropology or having some sort of groundbreaking, novel analysis. It was a human one, steeped in empathy, compassion, and human connection. It was and is a deeper and more nuanced reverence for the deceased. It was a desire to connect with and honor *my* Ancestors in a more genuine way, despite having written them off for much of my life because I knew little of them. It was the notion that I, as a museum anthropologist, had been put in a position to care for and about every deceased individual whose life somehow intersected with mine, whether through Repatriation work, or through the care and stewardship of material items that had once belonged to or been made by them. As we enter into the later half of the 2020s, I imagine we will continue to be faced with ethical and humanitarian questions regarding Human Remains in museums – their retention in collections, their use for teaching and research, and their display. These questions are applicable and relevant internationally as global Indigenous communities continue to fight for the Repatriation of their Ancestors beyond NAGPRA's limited reach in the United States.

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Received 25 Sep 2025
Accepted 1 Nov 2025