

With Anita Guerrini, Heidi Hausse, and Pamela Smith

The fall semester's Explorations in the Medical Humanities series began with Professor Anita Guerrini (the Horning Professor in the Humanities and Professor of History at Oregon State University) on the subject of the human skeleton as a scientific, artistic, and artisanal object and commodity in early modern Europe. Human dissections gave rise to the commoditization of skeletons, and in tracing the emergence of a marketplace for fully articulated human skeletons, certain questions arise: Who made them? Who used them? How were they crafted? We can turn to the fields of medicine, natural history, and art to supply clues, if not answers, although such categories often overlapped and developed together rather than discretely.

Skeletons were less important to physicians than to surgeons in the sixteenth century, and anatomists' investment in articulated skeletons varied; in works of natural history, skeletons remain conspicuously absent until the mid-seventeenth century, with osteology's firmer establishment and a growing market for anatomical specimens. Osteology gained ground as the basis for anatomical study as artists, too, laid increasing importance on learning the human form from life than from classical statuary or drawings. Straddling the lines between the artistic and the scientific, the late seventeenth century saw skeletons being featured at fairs, taverns, and coffeehouses, and collectors such as Hans Sloane purchased skeletons and body parts from various sellers.

Vesalius in the late 1530s discusses how to make a complete skeleton, and although such knowledge preceded him, Vesalius was the first to describe the *conventional* manner of making skeletons, from cleaning the body to preparing the bones with appropriate tools. From Vesalius onward, instructions for the skeleton's assembly emphasized the whiteness and smoothness of the bones, folding in a distinct aesthetic element to the process. Missing from all accounts for preparing skeletons, however, is the murky question of where and how to procure the cadaver, even as eighteenth century science commonly incorporated dissection and the mounting of skeletons as a part of anatomy lessons. Scottish anatomist and physician William Hunter, for example, avoids all mention of the acquisition of bodies, but comments that skeleton making requires a kind of necessary inhumanity.

Responding to Professor Guerrini, Pamela Smith (Seth Low Professor of History and director of the Making and Knowing Project at Columbia University) raised questions regarding the broader landscape of trade in skeletons, from the processes of slaughter to the market for non-human

bones, and the importance of experiential knowledge. The textual lacunae in instructions for skeleton making, certainly, would seem to demand trials of reconstruction.

The lecture enjoyed excellent attendance and high levels of engagement, with audience participants broaching diverse issues such as the representational techniques of skeletons, the development of practical methods such as wax injection in the preparation procedure, and larger narratives about bodies, bones, and belonging. We can note a dramatic cultural shift in attitudes toward dead bodies, with early modern Europeans treating them with less respect than we are used to today, but the unwillingness of texts to discuss the provenance of cadavers suggests an aura of moral opprobrium surrounding the subject. As the cadaverous mystery awaits further exploration, we hope to see continued interest and interaction with both Professor Guerrini's work and the Explorations in Medical Humanities series.

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