

# After Death:

*Museum Objects that Tell Us about the Afterlife*



by James Field, Lucie Grange-François,  
Alexia Kerwat, Mariana Denton & Alexandra Zhirnova

# Introduction

This virtual exhibition is dedicated to museum objects from around the world that tell us about what happens after death: to our possessions, our bodies, and memories of us. From artefacts from Ancient Egypt, the most death-obsessed culture to this day, to (early) modern books and scores with inscriptions by people we know very little about, from bodies of animals used for science and sacrifice to human bodies that have also had both religious and scientific significance, to the controversial topic of abortion, this exhibition deals with a variety of areas related to death and 'afterlife' in its many forms. Death and what comes after is something that everyone thinks about at some point in their life, and this exhibition is a collection of stories that we hope will start some important conversations between our visitors and make you think differently about death and what comes after. Perhaps you will find that the way we treat dead animals is not entirely different from what we do with humans, or that it is not just pharaohs and kings that leave important artefacts behind them.

We especially encourage younger visitors and their parents or guardians to discuss the objects presented in the exhibition, although we do understand that some might want to avoid certain sensitive topics, such as abortion, or might find some images presented here unpleasant. [pages]

This catalogue compiles the information found in the exhibition and audioguide.

We hope you enjoy your visit!



# I. After Death and Afterlife

James Field

Death was not simply an unavoidable event at the end of life in Ancient Egypt. Planning for death and the afterlife was something that required preparation during your life.

These three objects together represent different ways we can be left with a physical reminder of the dead. From a resting place, in terms of graves or tombs as well as direct representations, such as statues or other artworks and even photos, to simpler or everyday objects, such as a book, which could have belonged to anyone, which can exist as a reminder long after them.

## I.1 Stone fragment

The stone fragment was once a piece of the outer facing of the Pyramid of Khafre in Egypt, one of the Great Pyramids of Gizeh, the grandest of the tombs of Pharaohs.

Khafre ruled around 2550 BC, during the 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty of ancient Egypt. This period has been referred to as the golden age of Egypt, as it was largely a time of peace and prosperity. This allowed them the time to focus their efforts on great works such as the great pyramids, which are unmatched by any that came before or after the 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty.



The fragment itself was once a part of the pyramids outer facing, a layer of stone which would have encased the pyramid. The bulk of the pyramid would have been made of granite and limestone.

*UCL Petrie Museum UC16043  
Cuboid fragment of limestone, sawn on 5 faces*

While limestone was abundant in ancient Egypt, the facing stones came from the Tura quarry, near modern day Cairo. Tura limestone was prized for its high quality and purity and when polished, as this fragment is, the stone would be highly reflective. The pyramids outer facing of Tura stone means it would have gleamed a bright white in the sun, being an impressive sight even at great distance.

While Khafre's pyramid is the second largest of the Giza complex, due to its location and the elevation of the land, it appears to sit higher than the neighbouring pyramid of Khufu. The choice of material for aesthetic purposes and the positioning of the pyramid to look as big as possible have left what is arguably the grandest tomb to ever exist. While modern tombs or graves may seem modest in comparison, they none the less serve much of the same purpose. To exist as a reminder and as a resting place for the body after death.

## I.2 Funerary Statue

This second object is *Khafre Enthroned*, a funerary statue of the pharaoh Khafre, whose pyramid the previous fragment is from. The statue was made around the time of Khafre's rule and is made from gneiss, which is a very hard and dark stone which would have been mined in Egypt.

While the body of the pharaoh was housed within the pyramid, statues such as these were created as a direct representation of the body of the dead and funerary statues were used in place of the actual body for some of the funerary process. The statue depicts Khafre seated at a throne in royal dress and is adorned with symbols of the land of Egypt and symbols of power such as bows.

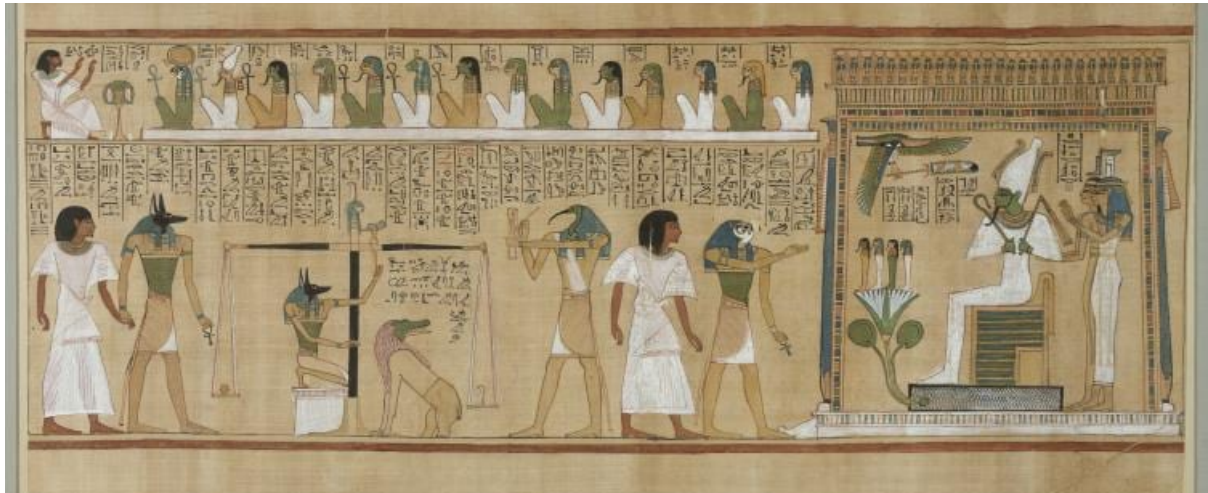
It was important that the body was preserved intact in ancient Egypt, as it was believed that the soul would frequently return to the body throughout the afterlife. As such, the body of the deceased went through a lengthy process of preparation and preservation after death to ensure the body was suitable for the return of the soul.



*Khafre Enthroned*  
Currently housed within the Museum of Egyptian  
Antiquities Cairo, Egypt

As well as existing as a representation of the pharaoh that could be revered following his death, these statues which were life-sized and largely accurate depictions of the dead, could be used as a resting place for the soul, should the body be damaged after death. Dismemberment was feared, with decapitation after death known as a second death. Any damage to the body meant that the soul could not return. Therefore, as well as tombs, these funerary statues offered protection from this possibility, ensuring the integrity of the body in an ideal state, undisturbed after death.

### I.3 Book of the Dead



*Book of the Dead of Hunefer (Hw-nfr) sheet 3 (British Museum)*

While the idea of a blissful afterlife was once reserved for the most powerful in Egypt, in later periods it was believed that all could reach the afterlife, if they were worthy.

Books of the dead are collections of texts produced in ancient Egypt, intended as a guide to navigate the journey to the afterlife, following death. These 'books' were printed on papyrus and could be up to 14 feet long and were likely kept as a scroll, rather than a traditional book.

The texts contained several spells for different purposes. Some will have been for protection from obstacles or danger and others relate to protection of certain parts of the deceased. There are nearly 200 of these spells known, with books of the dead containing a variety that the deceased thought may be needed in their journey. Following successful navigation of the underworld, the deceased would be judged, by the weighing of their heart by the god Osiris. If the heart balanced against the weight of a feather, the dead had led a good life and would be permitted into the afterlife. While not all in Egypt were left with grand tombs of works of art, these books remain as an example of the practices in ancient Egypt concerning death and the afterlife and can exist as a reminder of those who they belonged to, long after death.

## II. Books and Scores after Death: Inscriptions and Transmission

Lucie Grange-François

Afterlife and remembering do not concern only pharaohs and powerful people. Nowadays, a lot of objects are transmitted from generation to generation and allow us to remember and better understand our ancestors, and other people who left us. This section focuses on handwritten inscriptions in books and scores as a modern way of remembering.

### II.1 Otto Van Veen's *Amorum Emblemata*

Books are traditionally closely related to death because they are transmitted to someone else when the previous owner dies. Handwritten inscriptions often show this transmission. The history of the book *Amorum Emblemata* might be the story of successive deaths. Actually, the story of its owners is quite fascinating and enigmatic.

The UCL Special Collections are still working to reconstruct the book's history, using the handwritten inscriptions. One possible story has been recently research on, but further analysis (multispectral analysis) is currently being conducted. We know the book was made in the Netherlands. The author, Otto Van Veen was quite famous at the time; He had travelled a lot across Europe and was Pierre Paul Rubens's teacher. But Otto Van Veen had never travelled to England. He might have wanted to go and that is probably why he dedicated the book to two famous noble gentlemen who were great patrons at the time: William of Pembroke and Philipp of Montgomery.

We think that Otto van Veen sent several books to William of Pembroke and Philipp of Montgomery, which would explain how *Amorum Emblemata* travelled from the Netherlands to England.

Philipp and William were two brothers who were members of James the first's court and were pretty important characters. Philipp was the king favourite and William was involved in politics. They were also great patrons for artists like Van Dyck. They were Ben Jonson's patrons and they gave him twenty pounds every year to buy new books. This patronage was a family tradition as Philip's father, earl of Pembroke, was also Jonson's



*Amorum Emblemata, figuris aeneis incisa stido O  
Othonis Vaeni Batavo-Lugdumensis: Emblems of Love,  
with verses in Latin, English and Italian  
(UCL Library Special Collections)*

protector and supported the company that played Jonson's first successful play *Every Man in his Humour*. We think the book *Amorum Emblemata* was given to Ben Jonson by William and Philipp. Several inscriptions support this theory. On the title page, you can see crossed out inscriptions by Ben Jonson. The first one in the top right corner says "Et tanquam explorator" (as an explorer), which was Ben Jonson's usual way to sign his books. The middle inscription says "Sum Ben Jonson Liber" (I am Ben Jonson's book). Finally, the bottom inscription says "ex Philippi Museo" (from Philipp's collection). We don't know exactly why the inscriptions were crossed out.

On the right page, you can see a poem "The gift of one whose death I moaned." It can be related to William of Pembroke's death, because he died early from mysterious causes. The book is now a fantastic way to rediscover and remember Ben Jonson and his two patrons.

## II.2 Richard Wagner's annotated score

Inscriptions are also crucial to understand artists' intentions. Inscriptions upon texts and musical scores give precious information and hence allow us to be right in the interpretation of a work of art after the artist's death, which can be very challenging. Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* was first composed in 1843 and created in Germany. The opera tells the story of a Dutch captain who is cursed and condemned to roam the oceans for eternity. Love will save him: a young girl, Senta, falls in love with the captain and sacrifices herself for him. When she dies drowned in the ocean, the captain is delivered from his curse.

Wagner revised and changed his opera in 1860, and used red ink to correct some passages and change the meaning of the opera. The score in the exhibition is the first version that was corrected by the composer itself. The page you can see is the first page of the opera: the overture. The 1860's changes concern mainly the overture and the final and change both the music and the meaning of the opera. The red inscriptions are hence really important. First, the 1860's version relies on the use of leitmotifs. Leitmotifs, one of the greatest Wagnerian inventions, are the basis of the Wagnerian tradition until today. A leitmotiv is a musical theme associated with one character or one idea. For example, Wagner changed the overture to insist on the idea of redemption, and hence introduce the leitmotiv of redemption. The handwritten inscriptions upon the score introduce leitmotifs everywhere in the Overture. Therefore, the inscriptions transform the function of overtures in classical music. After the 1860 *Flying Dutchman*, the function of overtures in operas become to present all the important themes that will come out after. Let's listen to an extract of the *Flying Dutchman* overture:



To sum up, the inscriptions are crucial to continue Wagner's project and are the basis of his timeless music. Playing Wagner is the best way to remember his genius and handwritten annotations are very important to remember him in the right way.

*Allargo con bris.* **No. 3** Overture.  
*All'con bris.*

*1. Flauto piccolo*  
*2. Flauto*  
*2. Oboen*  
*2. Clarinetten*  
*1. (Englisch) Horn*  
*2. Fagotte*  
*2. Trompetten*  
*1. 2. Corni in F*  
*2. Corni in D*  
*3. Posaunen*  
*Euphoneide*  
*Pauken in D u. A.*  
*1. Violin*  
*2. Violin*  
*Viola*  
*Violoncello*  
*Bass*

*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*mf marcato*  
*mf marcato*  
*mf marcato*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*  
*poco a poco*

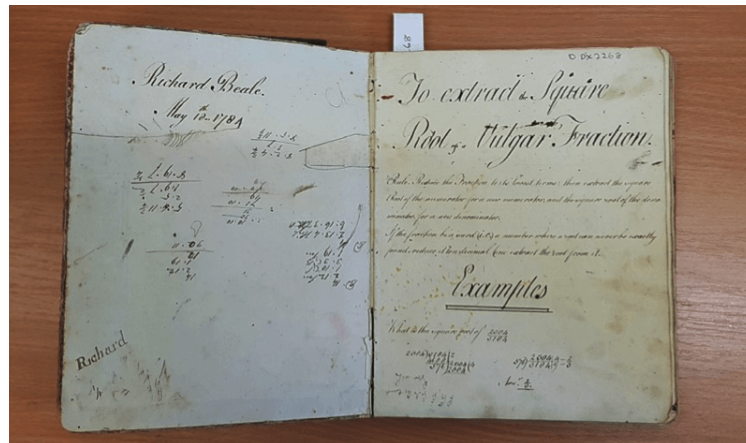
“Overture” of Richard Wagner’s *Der Fliegende Holländer* (*The flying Dutchman*) annotated by the composer with red ink.  
(British Library Music Collections)



### II.3 Richard Beale's mathematics book

Remembering through inscriptions concerns everyone. Children are also involved, as demonstrated by the mathematics book owned by someone called Richard Beale, who was 13 years old in 1784.

On the contrary to others, he was an ordinary boy living in a farm in Biddenden, Kent. He was between 10 and 13 when he used the book, and obviously he wasn't only interested in mathematics. He drew his everyday life as well as imaginary figures (angels, monsters) in the book, among his arithmetic lessons and geometrics problems. We find a lot of descriptions of his farm, and it is a valuable testimony of the country life in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England. He drew a lot of farm animals, as presented in the exhibition.



*Richard Beale's Mathematics book (1781)  
from a farm in Biddenden, Kent  
Museum of English Rural life*

The book has been lost in archives as it was not considered valuable. It has recently been rediscovered in the Museum of English Rural Life's archives. It is really interesting to see that the museum tries to make Richard's drawings alive and to reconstruct his life. For example, there is a drawing of a chicken dressed up in trousers – a fun activity still practiced by children in the countryside today. The Museum of English Rural on their twitter have posted a video of a chicken running with trousers – just like in Richard's book:

<https://twitter.com/themerl/status/1048541160271237120?lang=en&fbclid=IwAR3KgQ87Cp6venbohjhCxJ6M6NdjvkH5CsPUJP1OvnKFvxBjSWHnnkw0sp4>



*Richard Beale's Mathematics book:  
drawing of a dog  
(Museum of English Rural life)*

# III. Sacrificial Animals in Celebration and Science

Alexia Kerwat

When talking about death, oftentimes we don't discuss what happens to the anonymous creatures. The ones to which we have not given a name. That we may have interacted with on the side of the road or at a zoo. But never stopped to consider what happens to them after death. We have seen so far how humans have strived to be remembered but we have not covered what happens to the beings left behind. Humans can forget about them easily or even more than that, actively damage their state of living to accommodate their own. If one has considerations about the afterlife, those should be extended to other beings.

## III.1 Jar of Terrapins

Our terrapins here can make us consider how we treat animals that have passed away. Terrapins are a family of turtles, which not many know the name of. Also named pond turtles or Emydid turtles, they are slightly different from turtles and tortoises. Terrapins are semi-aquatic which means they live on the ground but go underwater to feed in brackish water. Their toes are webbed making them good swimmers, but they also have sharp claws, which makes them good climbers, to climb on rocks and other porous surfaces that may be slippery. Whereas turtles live in water nearly all of the time and tortoises stay on land.

These 5 terrapins were placed in this jar because that is the best way we now know of to conserve a specimen. In this fluid, it can stay preserved for up to hundreds of years. What many people wonder is why exactly there are multiple ones in a single jar. The answer is actually more mundane than it is eccentric. Storing multiple specimens in a jar is a common practice, it makes them easier to transport, and it saves up on the costs that would have been used on multiple jars and more space.

An element that is interesting to know about these terrapins is that they are preserved in an unusual shape. They neither look dead nor alive, not even asleep. When turtles die, they retract on instant into their shells. So these terrapins were injected with a narcotizing agent that made their limbs stay outside of their shells. In killing these animals to observe them, the researchers made them rest in limbo which neither looks completely alive nor dead.



*Terrapins contained in a glass jar of preserving fluid  
(Grant Museum of Zoology)*

### III.2 Sacrificial Bulls amphora

The ritual depicted on this amphora is part of the preparations for the sacrifice of 2 bulls. This was in the context of a choragic festival in a sanctuary of Dionysus. The two tripods were typical prizes won by the victors of theatrical or musical competitions; 2 tripods meant 2 victories. Given the amphora was made in Attica, a peninsula and the administrative region surrounding Athens, the competition would have taken place in Athens.

The women preparing the bulls probably aren't mortal women; they are meant to personify Nike, the embodiment of victory; this being suggested by their dress and headwear. This task would usually be taken on by young unmarried women. Whereas the sacrifice to follow would have been executed by men.

Many festivals around the world celebrate animals in the context of human victories. Some relate to parading herds of livestock to other grazing grounds, doing so dressing up the cattle with bells and flowers. One of these is the Fiesta de la Trashumancia in Madrid but many practices occur in a similar fashion in smaller towns and villages.



*Amphora by Πολύγνωτος, or Nausikaa Painter, c. 450 BC, Attica (British Museum)*

### III.3 Double Preparation Taxidermy Cat

Double Preparations, or double-preps are half-skeletal, half-taxidermy specimens. They are inside-on-one-side, outside-on-the-other specimens, with skeletons covered on one side by their taxidermied skin. The Horniman possesses 20 of those specimens, the biggest collection of doublepreps known today. Some doublepreps, like this one, have a red wax lining that indicates they were made by Schlüter of Halle, a German firm of natural history dealers, which supplied specimens to museums and private collectors worldwide.

This specimen was chosen for this exhibit for this odd quality about it. Like the terrapins, it is immortalized forever in a non but almost lifelike position, that is meant to be an object of study. The turtles should have been retreated into their shells. The cat would have been kept seemingly intact if only taxidermy. Many owners of domestic animals have stuffed their pets and kept them in the home. But in this case showing a half taxidermied body addresses the fact it has been carefully manufactured as an object of study, showing the skeleton and inner organs in the context of the body.

Taxidermy is a mix of many disciplines: sculpting, woodworking, sewing, painting, carpentry, and tanning. It can work from a shattered roadkill body or one that was executed to be taxidermied. The specimen is quickly frozen to avoid extended decaying.

The eyes can actually tell you a lot about how long ago the animal died: from rounded and fresh to dried out and wrinkling. The skin is removed, thoroughly washed, treated and tanned. It will then go back over the new, stuffed form that means all inner organic tissue and organs will have been removed. The detailing involved in the process is very precise in measurements to give accuracy and expression back to the body.

There have been many cases of so called “bad taxidermy”. Look up the walrus at the Horniman Museum for a laugh: the taxidermist who had received it back in the 19<sup>th</sup> c had never seen one before and therefore didn’t know of all its folds. The walrus at the Horniman is one big over stuffed triangle. But it has become the mascot and recognized specimen of the museum.



*Double taxidermy of a domestic cat (felis silvestris catus), pre-1912  
Made by Schlütter of Halle  
(Horniman Museum)*

# IV. The Fate of One's Bones

Alexandra Zhirnova

*'But who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?'*

*Sir Thomas Browne, Urn Burial*

We have looked at the things humans leave behind when they die, and we have looked at what happens to the bodies of dead animals. And yet the one thing that everyone without exception leaves behind – that is, our bodies – has always been treated differently from one's material possessions, and even from the bodies of animals. From ancient times to this day, the bodies of the great and noteworthy have always attracted public attention: they were displayed, studied, and sometimes believed to perform miracles. And because the idea of consent has only recently become important when treating human remains, there was naturally a lot of anxiety. Sir Thomas Browne, who will be mentioned later in the exhibition, remarked that no one knows 'the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried'. Indeed, this exhibition shows that very strange things have happened to some bodies we now keep as museum objects.

Of all parts of the human body, the head was always considered to be the most important one, and of all body parts the most strange things have always happened to heads. This part of the exhibition looks at the fates of some (often notoriously) famous heads and why they have been parted with their bodies.

## IV.1 St Catherine of Sienna's Head

An ornate reliquary in the Basilica San Domenico holds one of the city's most treasured relics – the mummified head of St Catherine, a fourteenth-century nun. Her right thumb is also kept in a smaller case nearby.

At the ripe old age of 7, Catherine had the first of her many visions of Christ. Later, as a teenager, she took a vow never to get married and became a nun. According to legend, her faith was so great she performed many miracles: she received the stigmata [link to the glossary], some saw her levitating while she was praying, and a priest claimed he once saw the holy communion fly into her mouth straight out of his hand. In fact, later in her life St Catherine refused to eat anything apart from the holy communion, which some argue was the reason she died quite young – at the age of 33.

Catherine died in Rome in 1380 and was declared a saint about a century later. When she became



*The mummified head of St Catherine*

*during a procession*

*Photo by G. Ceretani*

canonised, the church of Siena wanted her body to be repatriated in her hometown, but the Roman authorities refused. Therefore, a graverobbing party was organised, but the thieves could not carry the whole body past the guards, so they cut off the head and, it is said, some other parts of her body. Legend has it that the body snatchers were still caught, but St Catherine turned her disembodied head into rose petals in their bag and re-materialised it when they got back to Siena. It was placed into a precious reliquary where it is still kept today, next to her thumb. Some say that the snatchers also sold her foot into Venice. Her head and thumb are said to be miraculous and to this day are regularly taken out of the church during religious processions for the adoration by the public.

## **IV.2 Reliquary of Charlemagne containing his skull**

An even more ornate reliquary in Aachen holds the skull of the famous king of the Franks, Charles the Great. Although he was not exactly a saint, he was greatly respected for making France into a mighty empire, promoting education and patronising art. The immense territories which Charlemagne controlled became known as the Carolingian empire. Charlemagne introduced administrative reforms throughout the lands he controlled, establishing key representatives in each region. He standardised weights, measures and customs dues, which helped improve commerce and make the country richer. But perhaps the most important for us today is that he persuaded many famous scholars and artists to come to his court. These scholars and artists built some of the most beautiful churches and wrote and copied some of the most beautiful books of their time and established a new library of Christian and classical works.

Because of these grand achievements Charlemagne's skull was considered to be as worthy of preservation as any saint's. And it was not just the skull: after the king's death, almost all of his body was dismembered and put into separate boxes for the people's admiration. They are still in the same place in the Cathedral as a thousand years ago.



*Reliquary of Charlemagne containing his skull  
(Aachen Cathedral Treasury)*



### IV.3 *Johannisschüssel*



*Unknown artist, Johannesschüssel*

*(Naumburg, Cathedral Treasure Vault)*

Such interest in heads and skulls as we see in the case of St Catherine and Charlemagne was by no means unusual. The Middle Ages saw the human body as a 'most perfect form' crowned by the head. Special value was placed into heads, both living and dead: addressing your prayers to a saint, if accompanied by physical contact with their remains, was considered the most certain way of getting what you pray for. Those who had no direct access to a saint's precious skull sought compensation by man-made replicas.

Our next object shows exactly this. Wooden sculptures like this one were known as *Johannisschüsseln* and represented the severed head of St John the Baptist. They were respected as much as another saint's actual remains would be. One of the reasons is that the final resting place of the real skull of St John, if it has survived at all, is unknown and versions vary within different religions.

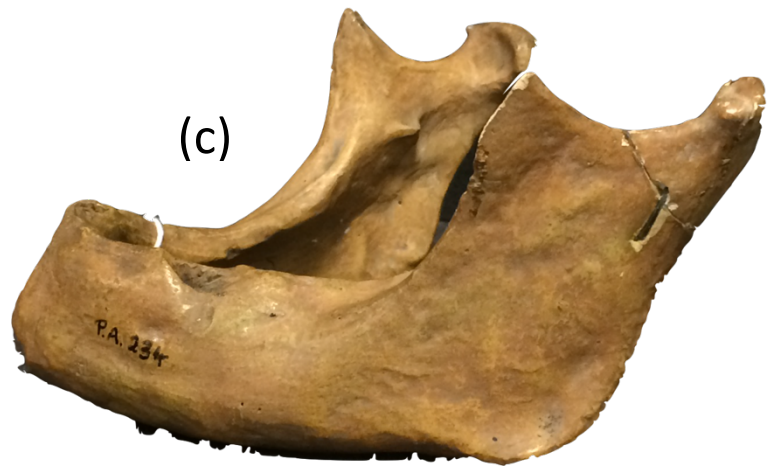
Heads like this were made throughout the Middle Ages, most notably in Germany, first from painted wood and later from porcelain. They were carried around town in religious processions, brought out during service and even used as props in mystery plays [link to glossary].

But the special attitude to heads, and replicas of heads, did not disappear with the end of the Middle Ages. The heads of famous people always have (and continue to) hold weight that the medieval people associated with saints and kings. Even body snatching was practiced all the way up to the twentieth century, which is what our next object is all about.

### IV.4 **Cast of Sir Thomas Browne's skull**

Sir Thomas Browne, a seventeenth-century scientist, archaeologist and writer, was extremely concerned, throughout his whole life, with the future fate of his body.

This is not unusual for a seventeenth-century Christian who still stands with one leg in the Middle Ages – born in 1605, a mere two years after the death of Elizabeth I, Thomas had an interest and an apparent belief in witchcraft, alchemy, and other supernatural powers. The supernatural power he himself seems to have had, however, remained unknown until the 19th century: his concern about the fate of his bones turned out to be prophetic, as his skull was destined to spend 88 years away from the rest of his body.

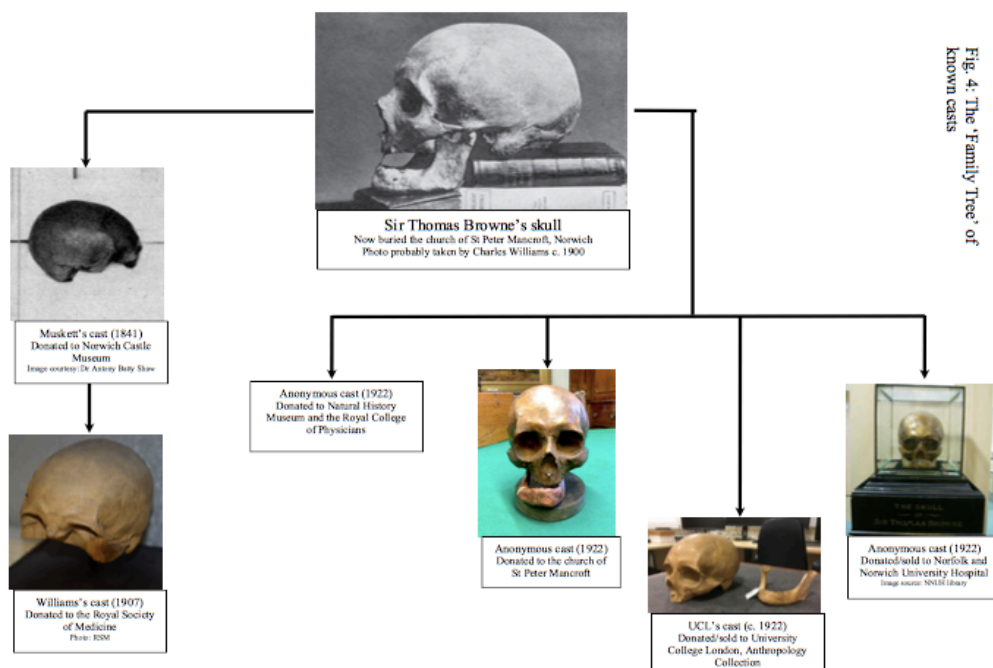


*Cast of cranium (a, b) and mandible (c) of Sir Thomas Browne, circa 1922, Norwich (?)  
(UCL Biological Anthropology)*

Below Sir Thomas Browne's memorial in the sanctuary of the Church of St Peter Mancroft, a tablet records the death in 1840 of Mary Bowman. During the digging of her grave the workmen accidentally damaged a coffin and took out the skull and memorial plate. Although it was in Latin, the workmen knew at once that this was the body of none other than the famous physician and polymath – Sir Thomas Browne.

This find immediately sparked the interest of Robert Fitch, who was a parishioner at St Peter Mancroft, present at the excavation, and a chemist by trade. His interest in the skull was by no means unusual: the first half of the nineteenth century was the golden age of the so-called 'cranioklepty' – a specific type of grave-robbery aimed at collecting the skulls of the great and noteworthy, apparently out of scientific interest. The spurious science of phrenology was then very popular, along with the infamous area of eugenics. Robert Fitch, a man of science (of the time), was most eager to study the skull. By 1845, it found its way to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital where it remained until the new vicar of St Peter Mancroft finally insisted on its reinternment in the chancel in 1922. While it was in the museum, several plaster casts of it were made – because Mr. Fitch wasn't the only one interested in a phrenological/eugenic study of the famous man's head.

UCL's skull, then, was born into a large family. We know very little about when exactly and how it made its way to the Anthropology collection of the college. However, we can speculate that it was purchased because of UCL's involvement in the study of both phrenology and eugenics. In simple terms, phrenologists studied the lumps and bumps in people's skulls in the belief that they gave insight into a person's character or intellectual abilities, while eugenicists believed that it was possible to use their data to identify and destroy 'inferior groups' of people. UCL has a large collection of objects acquired specifically for this purpose by Francis Galton, where object [5] comes from.



## IV.5 A Death Mask from the Noel Collection

This object comes from the so-called Robert Noel Collection that was housed by Galton's laboratory. I deliberately did not put the object's official title or description on this page because I would like to ask you to describe the man yourself first. Do you think he was hard-working? Funny? Trustworthy? Did he drink? Gable?

The truth is, we do not know. However, if you had read the 'real' object title first, your assumptions would have probably been quite negative, since this cast represents the face of a man executed for murder. Murderers' heads have attracted public attention since as early as the Middle Ages. They were put on pikes on bridges and city walls as a warning, but also perhaps as some kind of pre-phrenological specimens: this is what a murderer looks like. This evident interest in distinguishing the 'criminal class' from the 'intellectual class' can very well explain why UCL, as well as other institutions, were so keen on getting a copy of Browne's skull, as well as other casts of heads.

As can be seen, 'the fate of one's bones' concerns everyone, and it is necessary to be aware of how human remains are treated now and how they used to be treated in the past.



*Noel Head 34: Death mask  
of Carl Gottlob Irmischer of  
Freiburg*

*(UCL Robert Noel Collection)*

# V. Life After Abortion

**Mariana Denton**

After someone's death there is usually a collection of physical possessions and the memories held by loved ones. But what is left after the termination of an unborn child?

Womxn have fought for centuries for the right to keep control over their bodies and to not be judged for their decisions, as both have stigmas attached to them. In the past, and still in some cultures today, having an illegitimate child is frowned upon and if a womxn decides to keep her child she can suffer from social exclusion and humiliation. In the United Kingdom, during the 1800s, when the first object in this section of the exhibition was used in attempts to terminate a pregnancy, a woman would receive little or no financial support from the father or the state if she was not married, having to lead a financially unstable life whilst supporting a child. These are a few of many reasons why womxn chose termination.

## **V.1 Foreign Object from Bladder**

The first object in this section is a catheter, a rubber tube used in medicine for a wide range of purposes. It was removed from the bladder of a woman in 1870 after she had been complaining about pain. When the doctors asked her how the object found its way into her body, she said she did not know. It is probable that she used the length of catheter in attempts of an at home abortion and lost it. This can be assumed as four days after the removal of the tube, she aborted a four month old foetus. The white flakes that cover the tube are phosphates that attached to it while it was inside the woman.

The way it found itself into a museum collection and this exhibition was most likely through one of the doctors who removed the object from the woman. They would have kept it as a curiosity, and when the doctor retired, gave it to the Pathology Collection at the Royal Free Hospital.

## **V.2 A Syringe with a Spinal Needle**

The second object is a syringe with a spinal needle attached. This is an instrument used nowadays for aborting a foetus of around eighteen months. It can be used to inject the mother with substances that will induce labour.



*A Foreign Object from Bladder  
(Royal Free Hospital Pathology Collection)*



*A syringe with a Spinal Needle*

Although methods of abortion have become much safer and effective since the late 1800s, there still are many consequences for choosing abortion. Where access to termination is limited or impossible, womxn are forced to undergo extremely painful and possibly unsuccessful procedures, such as the one that occurred while using this piece of catheter. As seen in this case, there is a risk of an object getting lost inside a woman's body and the possibility of them experiencing pain and infection after the procedure and may even lead to them being unable to carry a child in future. This object represent the extreme actions womxn have taken to stay in control of their lives and their bodies. And the harm they have come to due to the procedure.

There can also be is high emotional impact as in many cases a womxn can imagine the potential life she is terminating. The emotional distress that comes with this choice can be reinforced by society and religion. In some religions abortion is seen as a sin, making a potential mother feel as though she has insulted god in her actions. Additionally, where abortion is still illegal, a woman must be discrete, not only to avoid social stigmas but to avoid a fine or incarceration. The lack of legality surrounding the procedure encourages more dangerous and experimental methods.

The physical and emotional trauma that remains after the termination of a pregnancy is an issue that is not often discussed, giving womxn little support in their struggle. Physical damage is expected when undergoing an uncertified abortive procedure, but what is not common knowledge are the physical consequences of a medically approved termination, which can include, excessive bleeding, infection of the uterus and scarring of the cervix.

What is thought about even less is the possibility and extent to which womxn experience negative emotions after the abortion. It is incorrectly assumed that if a potential mother choses to terminate, they do not mourn the potential life that was lost. When negative, psychological side effects can vary from guilt to severe depression and is know as Post Abortion Syndrome (PAS).

It is crucial that awareness of the difficulties faced by womxn after choosing termination increases and for there is to be more resources to provide support.

In most instances after an abortive procedure, there are no physical remnants of what has occurred, only internal ones, with the only object to act as a reminder being the one that induced the abortion.