theories and methodologies

"Vertebrae on Which a Seraph Might Make Music"

KATHRYN A. HOFFMANN

THIS ESSAY TOOK SHAPE IN AN ENCOUNTER WITH BONES: WITH CURVING, DARKENED SKELETONS PROPPED ON SHELVES OR HANGING SUSpended in white cases. They are displays of tuberculosis, scoliosis, and osteomalacia (rickets) in the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh (figs. 1 and 2). With bowed bones and spinal columns twisted into seemingly impossible shapes, the skeletons give the fantastic illusion of having been caught in mid-swirl in their cases, frail objects blown by invisible winds. A few of the bones of the feet at some point dropped off one of the skeletons with rickets. They were reattached with small and now faded ribbons.

It was the kind of encounter that is possible only in the odd itineraries afforded by pathological collections. Having spied the skeletons from the floor below the day before, I was searching for them among the familiar—yet always surprising—displays of any great pathological museum: formalin-preserved cancers and goiters, skin diseases traced on bits of flesh, and arteries bursting with aneurisms. Pathological collections are often these days somewhat eerie worlds of abandoned objects, whose visitors have gone away. Around the bits of human corporealia, labels yellow, liquids in delicate nineteenth-century jars sometimes turn green, and, obviously, a tiny foot bone occasionally clatters to the bottom of a case. This particular night, 17 September 2008, the collection had been specially opened for the fourteenth congress of the European Association of Museums of the History of Medical Sciences (EAMHMS). Yet with tastes for the pathological not universal, even among museum specialists, most of the congress participants had remained downstairs among the better-known and more heavily curated exhibits. I was largely alone as I walked among the cool white wood and glass cases, trying not to let my heels click too loudly among the dead.

The skeletons revealed some of the complex structures of any medical-museum display. They were message-bearing. The osteomalacia display was one of the few in the pathological section to have a printed text explaining the medical condition. They were empathy-

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producing, carrying with them a history of real human physical pain that wrenched my gut, but whose degree I could only guess at. Remnants of days when the bodies of the poor entered into medical displays without their accord, the skeletons were embedded in histories of class, law, and the rights of the deceased—in the complexities of medicine as triumphant agent of healing progress and as egotistical appropriator of bodies. And the skeletons were eerily, disturbingly beautiful. Their curves and bends invited poetry and the making of fantastic imaginaries.

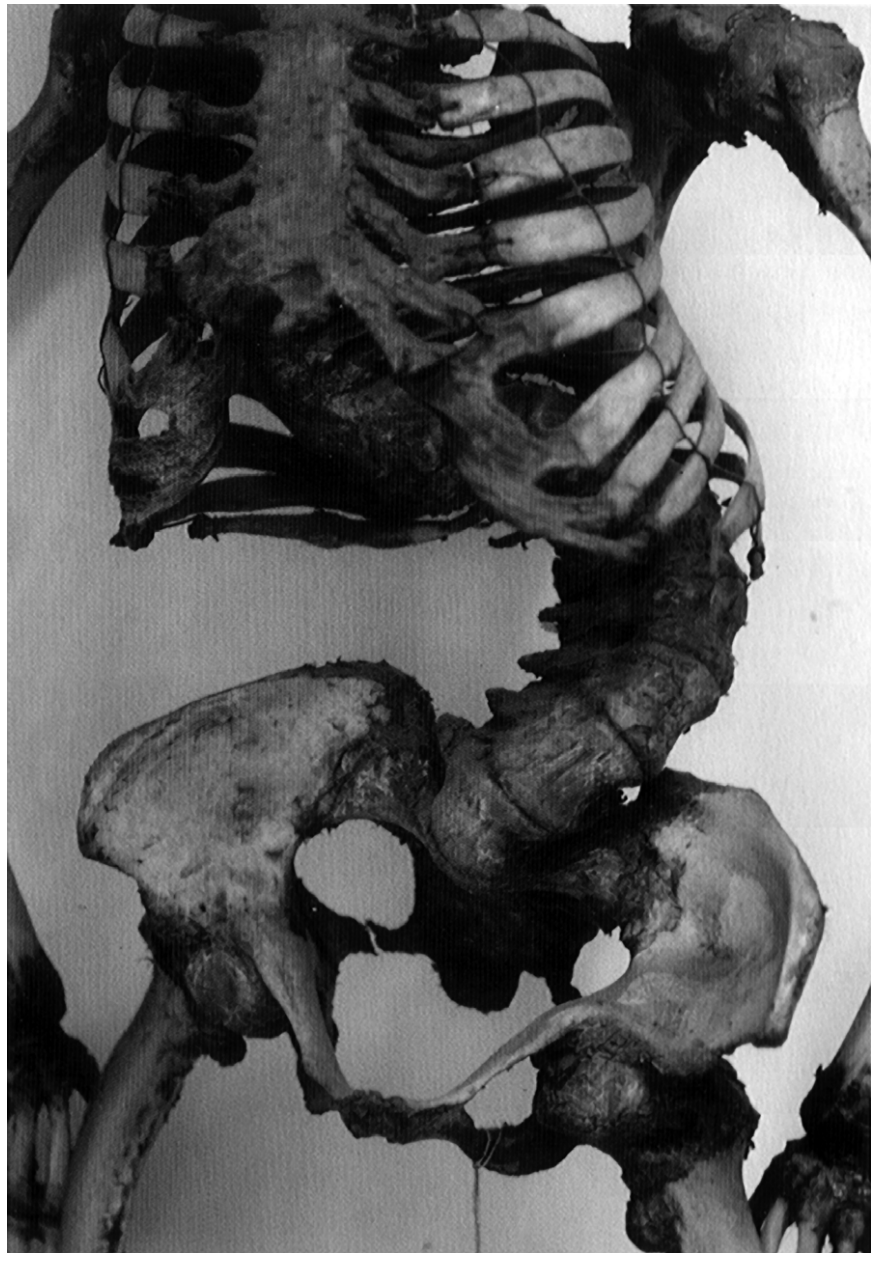


Fig. 1
Osteomalacia. Bell Collection, Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. Photograph by Max McKenzie.

"Notre association tourne autour de l'objet" ("Our association revolves around objects"; my trans.) had been the opening words of the congress, offered just minutes earlier by the association's president, Marie-Véronique Clin, as we sipped champagne in the lovely dark-wood-paneled rooms of the college. Her words echoed in my mind as I stood in front of the rickets display, sharply aware of the difference between talking about objects and revolving around them. When Clin, *conservateur du patrimoine* for the Musée de l'Histoire de la Médecine in Paris, had offered those words, she had been establishing the identity of this society for museums, with its objectives to develop exhibitions about the medical sciences, inventory objects, and protect the medical patrimony of Europe (European Assn.). She had distinguished EAMHMS from societies for the history of medicine and science, to which many of the conference participants also belonged. In calling for heritage to be protected, Clin's welcome had trumpeted the importance of things.

"Our association revolves around objects" gained an ironic dimension as I stood before

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FIG. 2
Scoliosis. Bell Collection, Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. Photograph by Max McKenzie.

the cases, with the improbable impression that the curving objects before me might begin to revolve around me. Speaking in a session titled "Medical Museums for the Twenty-First Century," I was at the congress precisely to suggest that medical museums today would be enriched by breaking more of the boundaries between objects and words, bodies and narratives. Using a long-lived popular anatomical museum that had inspired important art and literature, I read poetry about bodies among the bodies—or at least in a nearby auditorium ("Visions"). I was proposing to use literature and art to expand the force of objects and to allow them to speak in new ways. I want to use the spaces where anatomical displays butt up against other realms and meld into them to bring new publics to the anatomical museum. I want not only a professional association but a public that revolves around objects, caught in fascinations that will send them off on physical travels among museums and virtual travels across the borders of disciplines. My objects are often hidden ones—objects that are rarely or never on display for the public, that have disappeared into storerooms, basements, or closed collections. How one might again invite the public to revolve around such objects as the tubercular skeletons and how one might extend that invitation in ways that are ethically responsible, historically rich, and imaginative enough to help museums cross the boundaries among medicine, literature, art, and history are my project, and it gained new contours as I stood before the skeletons.

EAMHMS invited its members to turn about objects at every possible moment. We gave our papers on models in wax, plaster, and papier-mâché; moulages; prosthetics;

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contact lenses; mummified heads; and new trends in exhibition in spaces dominated by or once dedicated to objects. Our presentations—every one of them showing images—were surrounded by and shot through with things. Paper sessions alternated with museum visits to the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh; the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow; the anatomy museums of the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Saint Andrews; the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow; and the Bell Pettigrew Natural History Museum in Saint Andrews. Those who read their papers in the University of Edinburgh anatomical theater rested computers and scholarly papers on tables that once had held bodies. The spaces of objects were our topics, frames, and hosts and something sometimes oddly more intimate. We had "tea and coffee in the anatomy museum," as the program listed it. This moment of socialization, tea cups and cookies balanced gingerly among the medical models and bits of the dead, offered transgressive pleasures that were not lost on the participants, at least the living ones. Body parts in jars and cases have perhaps never experienced such convivial company.

I have used "we" although I am not entirely one of the "we" of EAMHMS, since I have no museum of my own to tend. I have been one of the "we" of the MLA for more than twenty years. Objectless though I may be, my museum studies work is object-born. It grew out of long hours spent in anatomical and pathological museums in Paris, Florence, Bologna, Turin, Vienna, London, Philadelphia, and Washington and in their storerooms and closets. It developed while I was shepherded about by curators who cared for their objects, believed them to be important, worked to turn them into effective displays, and opened locked doors and pried open crates with crowbars for me. I suspect some of them worried, at least at the beginning, that the professor of French requesting permission to visit the body parts in the basement might be one of the museum studies scholars who would paint their institutions as hostile spaces filled with subjugation and domination or frame my hosts as collectors through anxiety, acting out their sublimated terrors of death, or the assigned keepers of social violence done to things.[1] I know those theories but have preferred to leave them to others. Because it is the objects that draw me, fascinating, thought-provoking, and obsessive—objects that were once living beings or are simulacra of living beings: wax anatomical Venuses that open their insides for gazes learned and prurient, human leg bones that fan out in the shape of flowers, a column of kangaroo eyes looking like pretty agates floating in a jar, gangrened feet and hands that seem to crawl about museum spaces and that scampered oddly through my dreams. The theories I needed were those that helped me explain the power of objects, the importance of their displays, and the way they slipped out of cases to become discourse, art, and poetry.

Within the now burgeoning field of museum studies and the vast array of theoretical approaches it encompasses, objects have had varying status. In much work, they seem barely there, except as places of passage into larger social or philosophical problems. In just the titles of major recent works, such as *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, the massive anthology compiled by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, or Bettina Carbonnell's *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, it is the institutions, the collectors, and the social and political contexts of objects that are brought to the fore. Preziosi and Farago explain in their preface to *Grasping the World* that "what follows in this volume is an institutional critique of museology at large, investigating the complexities of the relationships of individual practitioners to structures of power" (xi). Between structures of power and practitioners lie theories of what motivates institutions, initiates and

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determines collection, forms power. The objects are there, along the way, but they do not command attention, figuring within the critique of museology. Since the 1990s, power, pedagogy, communication patterns, the social construction of reality, and the analytic and motivational frame of museums seem to have dominated the objects, which have sometimes become indistinct members of the category of "musealia" (Maroević 25–27).

In some recent studies, however, objects run to the fore, trailing contexts and histories in their wakes rather than the other way around. In *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, edited by Lorraine Daston, in Stephen T. Asma's *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums*, and in several of my own essays,[2] it is talkative things, pickled heads, monkey girls, sleeping beauties, and anomalous bodies that anchor the titles and dominate the essays. Daston's introduction to *Things That Talk*—a riot of things including art, glass flowers, soap bubbles, columns, and newspaper clippings—is entitled "Speechless":

> Imagine a world without things. It would not be so much an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one: no sharp outlines would separate one part of the uniform plenum from another; there would be no resistance against which to stub a toe or test a theory or struggle stalwartly. Nor would there be anything to describe, or explain, remark upon, interpret, or complain about—just a kind of porridgy oneness. Without things, we would stop talking. We would become as mute as things are alleged to be. (9)

For the authors of the essays, a world without objects is unimaginable except as a mute, lonely one, devoid of description, interpretation, and even complaint. A world without objects would be inhuman, unsociable, unlivable. It would be unbearably boring, not worth the effort to look, talk, think, or wander to the sign of the Swan to see the horned woman. Conversation, knowledge, toe stubbing, and tourism are born in contacts with things.[3] Mieke Bal's question in 1994, "[C]an things be, or tell, stories?" (86), was easily answerable. For much recent work, of course, things tell stories, are the stuff of stories, and are stories themselves. Questions about how they talk or invite talk, what aspects of them are loquacious, and what their talking means are more complex and interesting. In her essay on glass flowers, Daston inquires, "What is it about the Glass Flowers that wins them friends, that turns them into things that talk? . . . What makes an object irresistibly interpretable?" ("Glass Flowers" 229). For her, interpreters, irresistibly drawn to the act of interpretation, are bound to objects by ties of friendship. One should not underestimate the importance of the shift from power to friendship, institutional critique to talking objects. It is a different way of conceiving of objects, their spaces, and what interpretation seeks to do.

Asma writes:

> The odd thing about a specimen is that it is a kind of a cipher when considered in isolation. Specimens are a lot like words. They don't mean anything unless they're in the context of a sentence or a system, and their meanings are extremely promiscuous. . . . The significance of the collected object does not inhere in the specimen itself, but is socially and theoretically constructed. (xiii)

It is perhaps not the semiotic imagery in Asma's work that is most striking, for there are innumerable semiotic museum studies. Museum studies invested heavily in semiotics in the last decades of the twentieth century, with essays illustrated with the formulas of semiotic theory and the tracings of schematic drawings.[4] Asma aptly catches one of the ways in which objects risk overflowing those drawings, no matter how cleverly constructed, for their meanings are "promiscuous." They shift, re-form, multiply, divide, and pleasurably elude control. Asma's is a wonderful study that follows his own encounters with objects,

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but I'm less convinced than Asma that the significance of specimens lies entirely within social and theoretical constructions. Much of it certainly does. But some significance arises almost unbidden in the shock of encounters with objects like a skeletal frame twisted by tuberculosis, is structured in pleasures and fears that are sometimes hard to pin on societies or theorizing. Reactions to fetal specimens in jars seem immediate and almost instinctive, but I've watched those reactions, including my own, shift and change, as acquaintances with formalin-preserved things grow. Their significance is often for viewers neither scientific nor personal but somewhere in between. Specimens produce imaginaries that are theoretical, imaginative, intellectual, and visceral. Asma tells the story of a bored ten-year-old boy taken to the Hunterian Museum in London by his mother and the dissipation of his boredom in an encounter with the reproduction and pathological collections:[5] "'Oh, my God!' he repeatedly shrieked as he moved through the reproduction cases. I had wanted to cry out in the same way earlier, but the proprieties of adulthood squelch one's expressions of amazement and wonder" (76).

Amazement here, among the pickled bodies in jars, does, at least partially, inhere in the specimens themselves. Without labels, context, education, or any preparation on the viewer's part, they speak volumes about the body's variability, its capacity for deformation, the fragility of life, and the viewer's ability to contemplate that fragility. They produce shrieks, uncomfortable silences, and appreciation. Clear formulations of exhibitions, such as "[m]useum exhibitions are products of research, organized and designed to convey ideas" (Kaplan 37), get jostled in the encounters with some objects. The three purposes of museums set by the International Council of Museums are "education, study and enjoyment." In the official French of the statutes, the last word is "délectations," with its more complex shadings of "delight" and savored pleasures. It is the very promiscuity of meanings and delights that makes analysis of talking objects particularly problematic, and pleasurable.

It was a frequent critique of museums in recent decades that they were unreflexive and failed to either speculate themselves on the conditions of their displays or invite such speculation in visitors.[6] Yet some medical museums seem to have been so highly reflexive behind the scenes—about institutional preconceptions that underlay the acquisition and display of bodies and about the risk of publics overly enchanted or offended by bodies and death—that, unable to resolve the problems, they simply shuttered their collections. Today one can almost hear the skeletons clinking in their crates as they move in and out of display spaces. The vast collections of the Musées Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière in Paris are moving into storage that may be temporary or permanent—no one can say for sure.

Other museums have re-formed themselves, explicitly evoking older worlds of wonder. The Wellcome Collection, which opened in 2007, branded itself a "free destination for the incurably curious." A 2009 print ad for the Houston Museum of Natural Science offers the patron "Pure Substance" (illustrated by an elaborate piece of jewelry), "Super Stars" (Egyptian mummy cases), and "Constant Change" (a butterfly); each image deploys one of the *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer* categories of *artificialia*, *mirabilia*, and *naturalia*. Curiosity and wonder have come bubbling back through what Jean Baudrillard saw as the "cool," "cybernetic" phase of the late twentieth century.[7] Whether the museum as destination-tourism for curiosity will produce publics engaged in irresistible interpretation or in passive contemplation of institutionally staged wonders should elicit theoretical critique in the years to come.[8]

Cornelius Castoriadis said of great authors, "[A] great author, by definition, thinks beyond his means" (203). Museum exhibits in

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which great practitioners from different disciplines can be seen thinking beyond their "means" (their media, objects, or spaces) offer possibilities for new museal conversations and visual worlds. The Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charité recently combined objects of medical history with biographies of patients and found that the public lingered in the exhibition, reflecting on the biographies (Schnalke). Suzanne Anker's photographs of museum specimens suspended in the Ruine des Rudolf-Virchow-Hörsaals invite the public to consider the role of glass in anatomical exhibitions and the difference between appreciations clinical and intersubjective of once living matter encased in glass:

> Enclosed in glass and then again in glass vitrines, the specimen for the scientist stabs brutally at objectivity. In a zone of ambiguity, bodies and parts float anonymously as relics retelling historical time. . . . What questions are provoked by this once living matter? To go behind a veil is to transgress a hidden boundary. At the same time the veil becomes a mirror of our hidden selves, as we try to peek behind the curtain of unknowable worlds.
>
> ("Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum")

Once-living objects invite narratives, discussions about the ethics and the aesthetics of display, and visual and poetic reveries.

At the EAMHMS congress banquet, a small book of poetry, *The Hand That Sees*, lay at each place setting. For its quincentenary, the Royal College of Surgeons had invited twenty-one Scottish poets to write poems inspired by the collections or the work of the college. Publication had been made possible by the support of the Medical and Dental Defence Union of Scotland and the Scottish Arts Council. Two of the poets had chosen—from the many thousands of objects—the same skeletons that had riveted me. Tom Pow's "The Heart of the House" was inspired by one of the osteomalacia displays. The poem was printed in the book after the photograph of the skeleton with osteomalacia shown in figure 1:

> Blackened
> through lack of care
> like an old grate
> raked from the fire,
> its two wings collar
> the trapped air
> and fuse at their lower tips
> as if in prayer.
> Between them
> two abrupt vertebrae form
> a faceless head, a crown
> of sorts; at its back, a rack
> of black nibs trail
> to a pointy tail.
>
> Devil wings. Death wings.
> Clattering through the rafters. (28)

Christine De Luca took her inspiration from the osteomalacia and tuberculosis skeletons for her "Corpus Vile":

> Here, in this
> museum,
> skeletons catalogued and studied carefully
> are unlikely
> to raise a court case. Few would want these
> bones back,
>
> a rickle of deformity. Yet there is a strange
> grace in these harp
> shapes: curved, sculptural. A spine bent back
> upon itself,
> with vertebrae on which a seraph might
> make music. (39)

Corpus vile, "a useless thing, suitable for experiment," De Luca explains (Conn 37). A thing that is clearly not useless at all, for beyond what the skeletons might or might not serve or ever have served in the realm of medicine, they have given rise to poetry, to words that evoke the curious rickles of existence,[9] that turn abandoned things into wings of devils or harps on which seraphs might play. It takes but the slightest push of De Luca's

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poem to see the skeleton in figure 2 as an angel's harp. The poems of Pow and De Luca are not, for me, writings about the objects; they are extensions of the objects and of the museum itself as it is woven into new imaginaries. Museums unseen are merely warehouses of imaginaries of old. Opened again—even their problematic objects allowed to structure new conversations, histories, and imaginaries—they shift and make new meanings.

A number of people at the congress said they found it odd I was writing a piece on museum studies for a journal and a society they had never heard of. In one sense they were right. Work that aims to shift museology in concrete ways needs to reach the public of museum specialists, and I have other things to write for them. Yet "vertebrae on which a seraph might make music," caught profoundly between museum and literature, are evocative of ways in which disciplines might continue to revolve around objects together.

Notes

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1. Bal, reading collecting through Freud and Marx via Lacan and Žižek, suggested that collecting "can be attractive as a gesture of endless deferral of death" (98).

2. See "Excursions"; "Of Monkey Girls"; "Sleeping Beauties"; "Visions."

3. In "Excursions to See 'Monsters,'" I look at the role of "odd" bodies in the development of early modern tourism.

4. See, e.g., the essays by Pearce and by Maroević in *Museum, Media, Message* and Baudrillard's equations in Shelton 96.

5. The collection of the surgeon and anatomist John Hunter (1728–93) forms the basis of the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London. It includes animal and human anatomy, pathological specimens, wax models, and instrumentation.

6. See Shelton 98 and Kräutler. The latter wrote, "[A]uthors of exhibitions are very rarely asked to reflect on this situation of institutional preconception and to moderate its effects" (61).

7. "Reality," Baudrillard writes, "has passed over into the play of reality, radically disenchanted, the 'cool' cybernetic phase replacing the 'hot' and phantasmatic" (72).

8. On museum tourism, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. In the last decade, tourism has become an increasingly visible conceptual framework for museum practices, government studies, and theoretical work.

9. De Luca provides a gloss for *rickle*: "(Scots) a rickety structure or collection" (Conn 37).

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