

You Can *Buy* That?!

Supply, Demand and Authenticity in the Human Remains Trade

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There is a thriving online trade in anatomical, ethnographic and archaeological human remains that make ready use of new social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Etsy, and until recently, eBay. The “fetishization” of the ‘exotic’ dead that underpins this trade by its very nature transforms pieces of the body into material culture; curios, commodities or *objets d’art*. This practice has deep Colonial-era roots, but today’s e-commerce has only expanded collectors’ reach and created new “grey” markets.

In the coming years, my postdoctoral research will focus on two inter-related tasks. Digital humanities and computer science colleagues and I will conduct long-term data mining of relevant publically available social media and e-commerce platforms and perform image, text and metadata analyses of the resultant corpus. This will further scholarly understanding of the function of this community; what they value, how they trade, buy, and sell, and the larger legal and ethical contexts they operate in.

Bioarchaeological research will involve creating a systematic database comprised of photographic, osteometric, nonmetric, biogeochemical and possibly DNA profiles from Southeast Asian and Pacific Islands “trophy skull” specimens from the 1800s to mid-1900s held in Swedish and international museums. Not only will this research allow new intra- and inter-regional analyses of variation in Indo-Pacific trophy skull creation and manufacture (a very nascent research area), it will further test the utility of “osteobiographical” research on ethnographic specimens and aid museum curators and global law enforcement by providing the readily searchable database needed to more quickly and accurately launch investigations of authenticity, provenience and legality when human remains of this nature are seized by Customs agents.