

A bridge between the protection of future generations and the preservation of human remains in museums

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Abstract. Unesco's approach to safeguarding future generations through the Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights provides a significant framework for examining the preservation of human remains in museums. Understanding this practice in the light of ethics, science and culture is essential to ensure that future generations can learn from the past without compromising respect for the deceased and their traditions. Through balanced reflection and active engagement of stakeholder, a respectful and informative approach to the preservation of human remains in museums can be created for a future enriched by knowledge and understanding of the past. Through a multidisciplinary approach that involves experts in bioethics, anthropology, history, and cultural studies, museums can develop comprehensive policies for the respectful curation and display of human remains.

Key words: Unesco, Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, future generations, museum, human remains, ethics

The connection between the past, the present, and the future is a delicate thread that links humanity across ages. Preserving human remains in museums provides a tangible window into human history, enabling future generations to understand their roots and the challenges faced by their ancestors (1). This year, UNESCO has placed special emphasis on the principle outlined in Article 16 of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005), which is dedicated to the need to safeguard future generations (2, 3). Expanding on this concept, the interconnectivity of time—past, present, and future—symbolizes the continuous flow of human experience and knowledge. Human remains preserved in museums are not just static artifacts; they hold stories, memories, and insights that bridge the gaps between different epochs. Through the examination of human remains, scientists can uncover details about the life, diseases (4) and cultural practices of past civilisations. These data can provide the basis for understanding evolution and change. As visitors stand before these remains, they are presented with a tangible link to the lives, cultures, and

struggles of those who came before (5). This connection is vital for shaping a comprehensive understanding of our collective heritage and fostering a sense of continuity with the past.

The act of preserving human remains in museums aligns with the mission of passing down the legacy of humanity to subsequent generations. It's also a deliberate effort to ensure that the lessons of history are not forgotten that the sacrifices and achievements of previous societies are acknowledged, and that the mistakes of the past are remembered to avoid their repetition. By engaging with these remains, future generations are granted the opportunity to reflect on the evolution of societies, the advancements in science and technology, and the shifts in cultural norms.

The Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights draws attention to human dignity and autonomy, concepts that are also fundamental in the discussion on the preservation of human remains. To this end, it is essential, as enshrined in the Unesco Declaration, to nurture debate, education and awareness, as well as engagement, of the public in bioethical

matters by encouraging information programmes and the dissemination of knowledge on bioethics (6, 7).

The connection between the protection of future generations and the preservation of human remains in museums is fertile ground for the practical application of the ethical and cultural principles underlined by the UNESCO Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights. The challenge lies in balancing the promotion of historical and scientific knowledge with respect for the religious and spiritual values and principles of the involved communities.

Addressing this challenge goes far beyond the mere application of predefined ethical guidelines. It requires an inherently interdisciplinary approach that can overcome the barriers that often segregate different areas of knowledge. Collaboration between experts from different disciplines - anthropology, ethics, history, archaeology, sociology and others - becomes crucial to contextualize human remains in their cultural and historical framework, promoting a more comprehensive and respectful understanding of the different values involved (8). The preservation of human remains in museums presents a multifaceted ethical and practical dilemma (9). On one hand, these remains offer invaluable insights into the past, allowing us to unravel the mysteries of history, evolution, and disease. On the other hand, they carry deep cultural, spiritual, and emotional significance for the communities from which they originate. Museums must act as responsible custodians, implementing consultation processes involving the communities involved, and carefully consider the cultural, historical and scientific values involved to avoid perpetuating forms of cultural appropriation or lack of sensitivity (10). The aim should be to create spaces that are educational, respectful and allow for a complex and multifaceted understanding of human history.

Striking a balance between these considerations demands a collaborative and holistic approach. Only through this integrated approach will it be possible to preserve human heritage for future generations, while respecting the integrity and values of the communities involved.

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